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More of God Retreat: Exploring Biblical Images of God through Prayer

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More of God Retreat: Exploring Biblical Images of God through Prayer

Art Matheny

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Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

MORE OF GOD RETREAT:
EXPLORING BIBLICAL IMAGES OF GOD THROUGH PRAYER


Written by

ART T. MATHENY

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:


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MORE OF GOD RETREAT:
EXPLORING BIBLICAL IMAGES OF GOD THROUGH PRAYER

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

ART T. MATHENY
MAY 2019

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ABSTRACT

More of God Retreat: Exploring Biblical Images of God through Prayer

Art T. Matheny

Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2019

The More of God Retreat will explore biblical images of God while assisting those whose prayer life is being constrained and inhibited by unhealthy images of God. The unhelpful images of God that people consciously and unconsciously carry radically affect the way they relate to God and each other. Through teaching, reflection, and experiential prayer practices, the three-day retreat aims to assist people on a journey toward a healthier image of God with a renewed, vibrant, and deeply personal prayer life.

The retreat is designed around the exploration of three images of God found in Luke 15:1-31: God as Shepherd, God as Woman/Mother, and God as Father. Reflection spaces of morning and evening prayers will begin and end each day. During morning prayer, (Psalms 23, 131, and 63) participants will interact with Scripture in the practice of *lectio divina*. Nightly evening prayer will consist of a guided practice through an Ignatian Examen prayer. Both *lectio divina* and the Examen prayer will be introduced and practiced the first evening of the three-day retreat.

Spiritual prayer practices such as the Jesus Prayer/Breath Prayer, Intercessory Prayer, Praying with molding Clay, and Prayer with Photos/Visio Divina will be offered as places to interact with God during the group gatherings. These gatherings are the spaces to respond to the images of God that are being exploring. Toward the end of the retreat, a seventeen-hour Grand Silence will be observed. Throughout the retreat, participants will be discerning what images of God and which prayer practices may be specifically helpful for each participant. The retreat will conclude by inviting participants to discern if God may be guiding them into any specific prayer practice as they return home.

Content Readers: Richard Yale, PhD

Words: 280 words

To the Triune God, who lovingly sought me first and made me beloved. Every act of love and prayer is simply response to your lavish love and an invitation into life. The biblical images you offer enable us to know you more. More of you God, is the whispered desire
behind every page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Perhaps the greatest irony of a written dissertation is its thoughtful and detailed acknowledgement of foundational sources, while a single page is reserved acknowledging the people who foundationally shaped the writer. The following people and communities are my not-so-small footnotes and bibliographies, whose encouragement from below and behind is evident to me on every written page.

To my wife Jenny, and children Emma and Sam, thank you for your loving sacrifice of supporting me and giving me the space to continue on this journey. I love you and could not have done this without you. To my parents Jerry and Barb Matheny, sisters Susan Lauritsen and Lisa Duncan, and brother-in-law Matt Duncan, you have helped me to know and trust Jesus Christ from my earliest days, teaching me how to love and to be loved. To my mother-in-law Karen Kenny, your loving support, participation, and ongoing dialogue have encouraged me and have significantly shaped and furthered this retreat project.

To my mentors, Vida Oviatt, thank you for tutoring me through elementary school, instilling in me the tools and courage to learn. Rusty Hedger and Kevin Perdew, your lives gave me a vision for pastoral ministry that continues to shape me to this day. John Barry, sixty years my elder, your enthusiastic love for God and patience in the midst of suffering continue to inspire me, nearly twenty years after your graduation into eternity.

To my Spiritual Friends, Grant Agler, Christian Antonee, Matt Kitchener, and Ted Yuen, you have given grace and kindness to me in my greatest and worst moments. Each of you has stayed awake and prayed with me in the critical moments of my spiritual journey.

To my Spiritual Directors, Rob DeCoats, James Houston, Kent Place, Sandy DeMaster, and Fr. Bob Dufford S.J, thank you for your attentive spiritual companionship, helping me pay attention to the Holy Spirit's activity in my life. John Kiemele, your life and spiritual direction supervision are infused with compassion and kindness, and are God's tangible love to me. Jean Nevills, your spiritual direction, over the past several years, through many occupational and geographical transitions has anchored and tethered me back again and again to Jesus, the one who calls me Theophilus.

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To the communities of faith, in which I have lived and served, who have been conduits of God's grace to me, Logan Christian Church, Hume Christian Church, Atascadero Christian Church, Boulevard Christian Church, Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Dundee Covenant Church (ECC), Sonoma Valley Community Church (RCA), Westview Community Church (Wesleyan), and the Fuller DMin Spiritual Direction Cohort, you have been both the incubator and laboratory of my faith. I delightfully take my place among you as God's beloved and glory-reflecting community.

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INTRODUCTION

“What is going on with me?” I remember asking myself as I sat in the movie theater with tears coming down my cheeks. I was watching the action thriller movie *Gravity*¹ and I found myself crying. As a spiritual director, I have been trained to follow a person's tears unintrusively. This time it was my own tears I needed to follow.

Gravity takes place in outer space just beyond the earth's atmosphere. When disastrous events occur, leaving only two astronauts alive, very little hope of survival remains. In the midst of one astronaut's against-all-odds desperate attempt at returning to earth she (Sandra Bullock) breaks down in hopelessness and attempts to talk with God. As she begins to attempt to pray, she sadly says, “No one ever taught me to pray.”

It was in that moment when I began to cry in the theater. My heart ached because, although it is a movie, Bullock's character rightly portrayed a reality that I encounter so often in pastoral ministry. I saw in her character a desperate desire to pray with no real sense of who God is, and it broke my heart. People do not know that God deeply loves them. Through emotionally-numbing tragedies previously faced, this woman lost in space did not know that God loved her. People's images of God are often so damaged, vague, or undiscovered that it makes turning to God in prayer extremely impersonal and feels impossible for many people. In the movie, she stumbled through talking to God not because she was inarticulate, but because she unknowingly carried an impersonal and disintegrated image of God. In this character, I observed my greatest pastoral concern

¹ Alfonso Cuarón, *Gravity*, released October 4, 2013, Warner Bros, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1454468/videoplayer/vi2340006169?ref_=tt_ov_vi. I believe there is a theme of prayer woven throughout this entire film. I offer the option of viewing *Gravity* together with a following discussion of the movie during a portion of Saturday's free time on the retreat.

among the people with which I journey. I saw how her lack of knowledge of God handicapped her capacity to relate to God through authentic prayer. This lack of knowledge made me cry in the movie and still moves me to tears as I encounter people's lives negatively affected by deformed images of God.

Target Audience

The specific target audience for the More of God Retreat is the people from Sonoma Valley Community Church (SVCC). The retreat is specifically designed to be accessible by those who have had varying experiences of prayer and is at different stages in their faith journey. The retreat is designed for participants to come to the retreat without requiring any previous experience with prayer.

For many participants from Sonoma Valley Community Church, the retreat may be the first time they have ever experienced intentional and extended time away from people and gadgets to be alone with God.² I shaped the retreat with a variety of potential participants from Sonoma Valley Community Church in mind. Perhaps there will be young adults in various transitions, middle-aged people who feel overextended and tired, or seniors adults who are grieving losses. This retreat may be where God meets people of all ages, in the midst of their loneliness for the first time.³ Others coming to the retreat

² See this insightful description of the clash of technology and the practice of solitude. Jason Byassee, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007), 21.

³ Trevor Hudson, *Beyond Loneliness: The Gift of God's Friendship* (Nashville: Upper Room Publisher, 2016). I have observed that many people who make up Sonoma Valley Community Church have experienced significant losses of loved ones and struggle with a sense of grief and loneliness. Hudson's book has been recently read and has been very beneficial for many people at Sonoma Valley Community Church.

may feel burdened and plagued by a particular sin or addiction. Perhaps others may feel spiritually stuck and are longing for more spiritual freedom.⁴

I imagine that many people from SVCC will be in the midst of pressing demands from work, school, or family life. Wherever participants find themselves, the focused interaction around biblical images of God is meant to prepare the participants better to experience God in their lives both on retreat and as they return home.

The Specific Ministry Need

People have a desire without a direction, a longing without a pathway. The More of God Retreat will explore biblical images of God. In so doing, it will also assist those whose prayer life is being constrained and inhibited by unhealthy images of God. One of the most significant problems within this ministry context has been the unhelpful images of God that people carry consciously and unconsciously which affects the way they relate to God and each other. Through teaching, reflection, and experiential prayer practices, the three-day retreat aims to lead and begin people on a journey toward a transformed image of God. Often a “Holy Shift” moment occurs when God heals their broken images of him, which opens the way for a renewed, vibrant, and more deeply personal prayer life.

As a pastor and spiritual director, I encounter people who have a sincere desire to know and love God more intimately. Desire is often accompanied by questions about who God is and how a person might grow in knowing God. These desires for God are

⁴ “Solitude frees us, actually. . . . The normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God. Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviors that hinder our integration into God’s order.” Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 160.

seldom fully understood or recognized in daily life but nevertheless exist in all people. People's insatiable desire is only satisfied in knowing God, its ultimate fulfillment. Speaking to this innate desire for satisfaction in God alone, Augustine once said, "Because you have made us for yourself, our heart is restless until it rests in you."⁵

Unfortunately, sin disastrously impairs a person's ability and capacity to see and respond to God. The ultimate human desire for God is redeemable and never ultimately extinguished, yet sin ruthlessly highjacks people's desire for God by misdirecting it from its ultimate fulfillment. So, in one sense, sin is the cause and motive of both a person's distorted image of God and misaligned God-given desire. Sin attempts to replace God with lesser pseudo-gods.

Regrettably, these sin effected desires become misdirected and manifest into something very different from their God-given original intent. Sometimes these desires are referred to by the desert dwelling Christians of the fourth through sixth centuries, known as Desert Fathers and Mothers, as passions.⁶ These are misdirected desires manifest in everyday common attitudes, thoughts, and actions in a person's life. The Desert Fathers and Mothers warn of the destructive power of the passions and instruct

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

⁶ John Levko, *Cassian's Prayer for the 21st Century* (Scranton, PA: Scranton University Press, 2000), 40. Different from thoughts (*logizmoi*) and feelings (*pathos*), passions are the conscious and unconscious movements within the soul of a person which must be reformed in order to love God more fully. For the desert fathers and mothers, Levko states that, "Demons inspire evil thoughts, and when they are allowed to linger, they unleash passions in us and make the heart too heavy to focus on prayer. . . . The passions are neither good nor indifferent. As a result of sin, the soul has been cloaked with various passions, and it is the aim of praxis (spiritual disciplines) to strip the soul of them. These passions are habits of the mind and behavior, and the process of undoing is a gradual one." This process better prepares the soul "and nurtures a God-centered internal disposition for prayer."

followers of Jesus to do everything possible to be no longer governed by them.⁷ The human dilemma, at its most fundamental level, lies in people's misshaped, maligned, and misunderstood images of God, and how intensely deformed and misdirected loves influence every area of life.

Thankfully, as followers of Jesus Christ, the effects of sin have forever been broken. The ultimate desire of knowing and loving God is redeemed and realigned, being made possible through Jesus Christ. In a relationship with God, a believer does not only receive forgiveness of sins but also receives the life of God and the sanctifying Holy Spirit. The effects of sin that both distorted healthy images of God and misdirected God-given desires for God are renewed and reversed. This retreat addresses the practical process toward renewing one's image of God and the realigning of a person's loves.

Topic Importance

Jesus was asked by a religious leader, “‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’ Jesus answered, ‘The most important one is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all your soul and all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no command greater than these’” (Mk 12: 28-31).⁸

⁷ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of The Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 80,102,104,123. Here are some examples of places where the Desert Fathers and Mothers correlate God's presence and its effect upon these misguided desires called passions. Through the birth of the Holy Spirit similar to a mother giving birth or by keeping a contemplative gaze toward God the ultimate diminishment or destruction of passions within a person's life can occur. Through knowing God, the passions can no longer be a person's master. Although there is not one uniform and definitive teaching on the passions from the desert fathers, there is a uniform acceptance that God can perfect a believer and restore a proper image of God and redeem a person's desired relationship with God.

Loving God is one's most important priority in life. However, to love God, and necessarily one's neighbor, a person must know the God in whom she is attempting to love. Thus, it is of the utmost importance for every Christian to be growing in a relational knowledge of the living God. Every person's life is shaped profoundly through each person's particular understanding of God. Who God is or is not to a person, essentially effects and affects the way people understand themselves. Ultimately this impacts a person's social interactions within the greater world. Having unhurried time with God in prayer and other spiritual pathways are avenues into knowing God more intimately in an ever-increasing way.⁹ Those on retreat are invited into these spaces with God. This growth is assisted through spiritual pathways, which open people up to be loved and to love God more fully.

Within this paper, I will refer to the term "spiritual pathway" as a broad and encompassing reference to any kind of intentional response by a person to be more open to God. Encountering God through these pathways powerfully shapes a person's interior

⁸ All Scripture is from the *New International Version* unless otherwise noted. Mark 12:28-31 is quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The context of the first commandment to love God in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is within a larger biblical context of Deuteronomy 5:1- 6:25 (Exodus 20:1-17) and the Ten Commandments. Both Deuteronomy 5:6 and Exodus 20:1 begin with God's preamble of love. It is a declaration of an intimate relationship between God and his people. Exodus 20:1 says "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." It is only after this affectionate and loving relationship is affirmed that the Ten Commandments are given to the people. Deuteronomy 5:6 echoes and mirrors this preamble of love exactly before the they are spoken for a second time. God declares the preamble of love before the Ten Commandments are written. In both situations, the preamble of love is the governing hermeneutical text for the entire section of Deuteronomy 5:1-6:25. The preamble of love, with the image of a saving God from the mighty oppressive Egyptians, is to be understood and read before the commands for people to love God in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. These delivered people's love for God comes from the knowledge that God already loves them and has acted in kindness toward them. Therefore, any love directed toward God is a response to the love that has already been offered by God.

⁹ Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life: Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013). This is an excellent book dealing with the relationship between unhurried time and cultivating a growing relationship with Jesus.

spiritual terrain. Under the umbrella term of spiritual pathways, I also include terms such as spiritual disciplines and spiritual practices as avenues that assist a growing capacity for relational intimacy with God.

A spiritual discipline is an activity done or not done,¹⁰ which aids in offering oneself to God. When referring to a spiritual discipline, I am implying a more rhythmic or consistent repetition that usually accompanies its ongoing expression in the life of a person. A spiritual discipline, in this sense, could be a daily Scripture meditation or a nightly Examen prayer expressed in a more consistent or rhythmic pattern.

On the other hand, when I refer to the term spiritual practice, it has the sense of something not necessarily practiced with a rhythmic expectation but done as a more occasional expression. An example might be an activity such as praying with clay or drawing a picture following a time of meditation on a particular part of Scripture. There is not necessarily an expectation of a rhythmic pattern with a spiritual practice, but it is often practiced in a specific occasion or context.

Both spiritual disciplines and spiritual practices are spiritual pathways explored during the retreat. They are pathways of offering oneself to God, in the act of loving trust, at God's gracious invitation. God is the one who gently works in unique and timely ways. Any invitation by God is an invitation into a loving relationship. This loving relationship with God is not matured through exerting oneself through human willfulness into a

¹⁰ One helpful organization of spiritual disciplines are those of abstinence and those of engagement. Willard says that, "Abstinence and engagement are the outbreathing and inbreathing of our spiritual lives, and we require disciplines for both moments. Roughly speaking, the disciplines of abstinence counteract tendencies to sins of commission, and the disciplines of engagement counteract tendencies to sins of omission." Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 175-176. Also see the grouping of disciplines as Inward, Outward, and Corporate in Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), v.

predetermined outcome.¹¹ Neither is this offering of oneself to God done by exhausting oneself for a measurable spiritual experience.¹² These are not the goals of Christian spiritual pathways nor this retreat. If mishandled, spiritual pathways can actually hinder authentic encounter with God, by overemphasizing the particular practice itself over its intended purpose. In practicing any spiritual pathway, spiritual discipline or spiritual practice, the object of faith and the agent of change is God alone.

It is also important to know what spiritual disciplines are and what they are not. One misperception of spiritual pathways is that spiritual pathways can somehow earn¹³ special favor from God. This misunderstanding is a distortion of God's gracious character and a commandeering of the ultimate goal of any spiritual pathway. Sometimes referred to as a means of grace, spiritual pathways simply prepare people to become more available and receptive to God and the graces God delights to offer.

Reason for Topic of Interest

As a college student, I was first introduced to a retreat setting, which had extended times dedicated to solitude and prayer with God. It was during these retreats of prayer, where God met me in significant ways of transforming and expanding my images of God. These times away on retreat alone with God became vital places where God used

¹¹ Ibid., 9-10.

¹² "At the beginning of your practice of solitude, do not exhaust your senses trying to feel holy or attempting to see something divine, for in this way, you will wear out your body and mind in vain. God cannot be seen by the flesh, nor can he be perceived by the senses. The only work you should do during your retreat is to cease from all work." Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2003), 199.

¹³ See further discussion: Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 25.

these biblical images to reform and transform my deformed images of God. My evolving images of God profoundly shaped my interior life. I noticed in my own life, how enduringly linked my own understanding of God permeated the whole of life.

These spaces became places for God to do the grace work within me that I could acknowledge but may never ultimately fully understand. Gradually, as these emerging biblical images of God began to bear fruit, I noticed myself changing day-by-day, little-by-little. The retreat setting became the initial place where my held images of God were being reshaped, and this was reshaping the way I saw myself, my family and friends, my occupational call to pastoral ministry, and even people I did not know. The shaping by God that was occurring within me on these retreats was not limited only to the time of retreat but also extended far beyond and between the retreat setting. These rhythmic retreats were refreshing, reordering, and spiritually fertilizing spaces where spiritual fruit was produced through me in the world in which I reentered. This More of God Retreat is birthed and designed from my own experience of encountering God on retreats, both as a participant and later as a leader.

The reason for this unique guided prayer retreat is to assist participants in developing ways to experientially know God more through the practice of prayer in a retreat setting. These times away with God in prayer have cumulatively affected the ways I relate with God and with others. By focusing on biblical images of God in an unhurried manner, one makes himself available to the God who speaks. The retreat space may become a place of personal encounter with the loving, unpredictable, intimate God revealed in the biblical images of God explored on the retreat. For God is the

unfathomable end of desire and the transformer of souls. Because of its interactive design, the retreat offers various learning environments to explore biblical images of God while fostering a growing communication with the God one is growing to love.

Thesis of Project

This project is a biblical Image of God Retreat, designed to assist individuals from the Sonoma Valley Community Church to explore biblical images of God through teaching, reflection, and experiential prayer practices.

Overview of Project Content

The project is a retreat designed around the exploration of three images of God found primarily in Luke 15:1-31 namely: God as Shepherd, God as Woman/Mother, and God as Father. Reflection spaces will be offered each day during morning prayer, (Psalm 23, 131, and 63) and through group gatherings around *lectio divina*.¹⁴ Nightly evening prayers will consist of a guided practice through an Ignatian Examen prayer. Both *lectio divina* and the Examen prayer will be introduced and practiced the first evening.

Spiritual prayer practices such as the Jesus Prayer/Breath Prayer, Intercessory Prayer, Praying with molding Clay (play-dough), and Prayer with Photographs/*Visio Divina* will be offered as places to interact with God. The final seventeen hours, Saturday evening through Sunday will be a space for observed silence (grand silence). Throughout

¹⁴ Glen G. Scorgie ed., *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, "Spiritual Reading (*Lectio Divina*)," (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 768. "In the twelfth century, an Italian monk, Guigo the Second, formulated the elements that for a thousand years had guarded the church against depersonalizing the biblical text into an affair of questions and answers, definitions and dogmas. He named it, *Lectio Divina* (spiritual reading). His formulation continues to guide Christians in the practice of spiritual reading. He named four elements: reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*)."

the retreat, participants will be discerning what images of God they hold and what expanding images God may be inviting them to receive. The retreat will conclude by inviting each person to discern if God may be guiding him or her into any specific prayer practices as they return home. The spiritual practices the participants adopt later are meant to give a liturgical habit-forming framework for the Holy Spirit to reform the heart-habit loves of the participants.¹⁵ These heart forming habits, open people up to the activity of God in their growing relationship with God.

Written resources are given to each retreatant for continued exploration and teaching. Every person on retreat will receive a retreat binder with selected chapter readings (photocopied), instructions for exploring other guided practices, the contemplative music listened to over the retreat, and a copy of the book, *The Good and Beautiful God*, by James Bryan Smith. This book can be utilized as a small group study resource upon their return home. I also personally follow up with each participant after the retreat's completion to companion with participants as they further process the retreat within each person's unique journey of faith.

¹⁵ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016). Smith suggests that people were made to love God and it is in their desires where their loves, aligned or misaligned, are ultimately revealed. Misaligned love toward God is often unconscious but is certainly learned and spiritually deforms a person. Thus, transformation is simply not new information but a reformation of a person's loves directed to God. Inhabiting a person's faith involves healing her image of God through new liturgies and practices which consciously and unconsciously realign her heart toward God. Since a human person cannot be reduced to a brain on a stick, inhabiting faith reforms a person's love and life. Thus the retreat emphasis extends beyond the retreat itself with spiritual practices habituating and reorienting a person's loves back toward God.

PART ONE

SONOMA: COMMUNITY AND CHURCH CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The Community of Sonoma, California, has a rich history, which has contributed to the shaping of the present community context of Sonoma. On July 4, 1824, Father Jose Altimira founded Mission San Francisco Solano de Sonoma.¹ The Sonoma Mission is the most historic landmark in Sonoma. Located on the Sonoma Plaza (Square), it is in the center of town and considered the crown jewel of Sonoma. Of the twenty-one California missions planted by Franciscans during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, Sonoma is the northernmost mission and the last to be developed.² These missions located down the coast of California and into the present-day Baja Peninsula of Mexico were intentionally linked together. If visited sequentially, a person could travel from one mission to the next mission in one day by horseback. Traveling over long distances and through varying terrain, these missions were used as a highway to travel up and down the coast of California. Present day Highway 101 also known as El Camino Real, the Kings

¹ City of Sonoma, "History of Sonoma," accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.sonomacity.org/history-of-sonoma/>.

² Ibid.

Highway,³ follows in many places the highway forged hundreds of years ago by these early missions.

The early presence of a Christian witness in Sonoma by the Franciscans is remembered by many people of Sonoma with mixed reactions. While it is acknowledged that some of the Franciscans were intending to do good and desired to help the indigenous people of this area, there are other events which happened during the Franciscan mission building era that have hurt the witness of the Church in the eyes of many local people in Sonoma Valley even to this day.⁴

The cruel beatings and punishments inflicted upon some of the native people of the Sonoma Valley, in an attempt to somehow civilize them, were issued by the founding Padre Altimira. These atrocities and misdealing with the native indigenous peoples' of Sonoma Valley have been documented and remembered by historians of Sonoma.⁵ The failings of the Church of the past, contribute to the already skeptical view of the Church's intentions held by some Sonomites. The mission was held by the Church for only a short time being later annexed by the Mexican government who had further plans for Sonoma.

It was General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo who first designed and laid out what is now referred to as the Sonoma Plaza (Square). The Sonoma Square is an eight-acre parcel of land, initially consisting of military barracks designed alongside the original

³ Scholastic "Missions," accessed July 3, 2018, <http://teacher.scholastic.com/researchtools/researchstarters/missions/>

⁴ History.com, "California Missions," accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/california-missions>.

⁵ Missions.org, "Mission San Francisco de Solano," accessed July 3, 2018, http://www.californiamissions.org/individual/mission_san_francisco_de_solano.htm.

mission by Mexican General Vallejo. During the Mexican governance of Sonoma from 1834-1846, more buildings were built around the square, and more land developed for farming.

In June of 1846, there would be an uprising. It was at this uprising, sometimes referred to as the Bear Flag Revolt, where a unique bear flag with a star, first was unfurled.⁶ This flag would later inspire the present-day California state flag with its distinguishing bear and star. The flag, raised by a small group of independent settlers from the United States, represented their declaration of independence from the Mexican government control of the area in 1846. Declaring their independence is still important to the independent people who make up present-day Sonoma.

Sonoma is also known, nationally and internationally as one of the premier wine valleys in the world. Growing grapes and making wine has been integral to the shaping of Sonoma Valley. Grapes have been planted in the Sonoma Valley since 1821, with Father Altamera. Many of the surrounding vineyards planted in the mid-1800s began by the cuttings from the original large vineyard planted on the hill behind the mission founded by Father Altamera.⁷ Historically, this is one definite way the mission contributed to the heritage of vineyards and is linked forever to the eventual development of vineyards throughout the Sonoma Valley.

⁶ Sonoma League, "Sonoma History," accessed July 3, 2018, <http://sonomaleague.org/sonoma-history.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

Years later, a Hungarian man named Count Agoston Heraszthy⁸ came to Sonoma Valley and greatly expanded the wine industry, by bringing several thousand grapevine clippings from Europe to be planted in Sonoma Valley. Today, Sonoma is synonymous with world-class wines and has become a popular destination for many tourists each year.

Sonoma Wealth and Age

The average household income in Sonoma is around \$112,000 where the state average of California is \$92,000. The \$20,000 annual household income difference highlights the wealth that adorns the city of Sonoma. Sonoma has some of the highest real-estate prices in the area contributing to the high cost of living in Sonoma. The makeup within SVCC is a mixture of people from a variety of financial backgrounds that reflect Sonoma's diverse socio-economics.⁹

Some people who have moved here during their adulthood came from financially successful occupations that had higher paying salaries to afford the cost of living in Sonoma. There are also people who were born and raised in Sonoma and still live in their family's home. Since the 1960s, escalating housing prices have not been matched proportionately with the basic increased income for most jobs in Sonoma. For instance, the same house bought for \$13,000 in 1960 is now worth nearly \$700,000 in 2018. This means that the same house is over fifty-three times more expensive (5,300 percent

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mission Insite, "Sonoma Valley," November 1, 2017, missioninsite.com. Fullsite Report acquired in conjunction with the Evangelical Covenant Church in order to have up to date data and demographic information for a five-mile radius surrounding Sonoma Valley Community Church.

inflation) today than it was in 1960.¹⁰ In Sonoma, 80 percent of the homes cost over \$500,000 with nearly 40 percent of the homes priced over \$1,000,000.¹¹

Sonoma Valley Community Church and the surrounding community are often made up of people from these two very different financial situations. People are living in million-dollar homes, and others are living in trailer park homes costing \$220,000. Most people from the church are now on fixed incomes from pensions, retirement savings, and other investments that they depend on to support them in their latter years.

Sonoma is a retirement destination with 47 percent of the people fifty years or older and with 24 percent of those people being sixty-five years of age or older.¹² In contrast, San Francisco, a city less than fifty miles away, in 2017 had about 12 percent of its inhabitation being sixty-five years or older.¹³ The median age in Sonoma is forty-five years old which is nine years older than the median age for the state of California, which is thirty-six.¹⁴

SVCC also reflects this age demographic and is predominately made up of people over fifty-five years of age. This high population of over fifty-five years of age is reflected in the community with many housing developments around the city that required people to be fifty-five years or older to purchase the home. The community of

¹⁰ This is an actual case study with a person from Sonoma Valley Community Church. The figures come from the current house market value as of July 2018.

¹¹ Mission Insite, "Sonoma Valley."

¹² Census.gov, "Sonoma," accessed July 2, 2018, <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Sonoma.htm>.

¹³ Census.gov, "San Francisco County," accessed July 2, 2018, <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/counties/SanFranciscoCounty.htm>.

¹⁴ Mission Insite, "Sonoma Valley."

Sonoma accommodates to a high percentage of retired persons that reside here. Sonoma also has many activities which focus on interests of retired people sixty-five years or older.

A demographic study¹⁵ taken within a five-mile radius of Sonoma Valley Community Church reveals that most people fall within a group entitled the Golden Years Guardians who are reaping the rewards of their hard work and are footloose and family free.¹⁶ People in this particular age and demographic often have disposable income, although many are on a fixed income with investments in the stock market as well. This age demographic also values loyalty and longevity. These people are often living quiet lives and yet are still very physically active with groups and social clubs.

Many within this particular population segment live alone because they have lost a spouse. Loneliness, often because they have lost their spouses, has radically altered this stage of life. This significant spiritual experience of loneliness in this season of life is something I have noticed often in my conversations with people throughout the community of Sonoma. I have sat for many hours listening to people work through their grief of losing a spouse. In this context of elderly loneliness, a movement of perspective, from being alone to being in solitude with God is happening. Without having a desire to fix these beautiful grieving people's loneliness, honest conversations around being alone and being with God in their loneliness have been very fruitful. These conversations have

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

happened with people inside and outside the church. This sense of elderly loneliness has been a place God has met many people in Sonoma.

Sonoma Education and Economy

Sonoma is a highly educated town with nearly 50 percent of people with post-high school education. Twenty-five percent of the people have received bachelor's degrees, with 13 percent completing advanced degrees.¹⁷ As of 2017, 61 percent of the inhabitants of Sonoma worked in white-collar jobs, which often has accompanying higher responsibility as well as higher wages.¹⁸

The surrounding community, as well as the church, is made up of many people who have varying levels of formal education. Within the present leadership team of six people at the church, two people completed advanced degrees, three people completed bachelors' degrees, and one person has worked in commerce and completed high school. These three educational levels, advanced degrees, bachelors degrees, and high school diplomas, represent well the community of Sonoma as well as the makeup of the church.

The local economy is connected to wine and hospitality, with more than 425 wineries in Sonoma County, drawing millions of tourists annually. It is estimated that the wine industry and related tourism in Sonoma Valley contribute to over eleven billion dollars to Sonoma County's economy every year. It represents about 40 percent of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Sonoma County's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually.¹⁹ It is hard to find people not connected in some way to the wine industry in Sonoma.

Amidst the influx of tourists, the charm of Sonoma remains in its relational connectedness and sense of community that the town retains. This sense of community is seen in the supporting of the local minor league baseball team called The Sonoma Stompers, which relates to stomping grapes during harvest season. Sonoma is also famous for its annual Fourth of July celebration, which includes a parade around the Sonoma Square and a fireworks extravaganza at night.²⁰ It is not uncommon for locals to bump into each other at one of the grocery stores in town, standing in the aisles discussing friends and family they mutually know from school or their workplace.

Sonoma Fires

Perhaps this strong community support was never more evident than on Sunday, October 8, 2017. In the late evening, wildfires broke out all around Sonoma and Napa countries. Dry from little moisture through the previous months and driven by winds gusting over forty miles an hour, multiple fires ravaged acres of land in the span of only a few hours. Rising early on Monday, October 9, 2018, those who lived in Sonoma realized that they were literally surrounded by uncontained raging fires that were actively burning

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Katrina Brown Hunt, "America's Best Towns for July 4th," Travel and Leisure, June 16, 2014, <https://www.travelandleisure.com/slideshows/americas-best-towns-for-july-4th#8>. This article ranks Sonoma, CA as 8th in the US for best towns to celebrate the Fourth of July.

to the north, south, east, and west.²¹ These wildfires would eventually burn over 160,000 acres or 250 square miles of land. That evening twenty-three people would lose their lives in Sonoma County due to the fires, which became the deadliest fires to date, in the history of California. Eight thousand four hundred structures were destroyed with an estimated cost of over one billion dollars in damage.²²

The local high school became an evacuation site where over one hundred people were housed for over ten days as the fires continued to burn throughout the area. The community came together and supported one another in sacrificial ways, adopting the theme Sonoma Strong as a communal reminder of shared. Over the course of several weeks, there were thousands of signs and banners hung in every open space possible thanking the first responders who sacrificed so much in Sonoma's time of need. The people of Sonoma will forever remember the events of that evening and the brave actions of many people in the weeks and months that followed.

Sonoma Fitness

Northern California is one of the healthiest places to live in the US.²³ Many people live intentionally physically fit lifestyles. People are often very conscious of their

²¹ Sonoma Magazine, "Sonoma County Fires in 40 Photographs," accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.sonomamag.com/sonoma-county-fires-in-40-photographs/>.

²² New York Times, "California Wildfires Investigation," accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/california-wildfires-investigation.html>.

²³ Northern California cities are consistently in the top 4 healthiest and physically fit places to live in America. Time Magazine, *10 Healthiest Places to Live in America*, July 6, 2014, <http://time.com/2982814/10-healthiest-places-to-live/>.

overall physical health. This is evident in the chosen rhythms of exercise and diet. The lifestyle of being fit is widely understood, and its terminology is culturally relevant.

Upon moving to Sonoma, I began to ask God “Where are the people and what are they doing on a routine basis on Sunday mornings? ” As I continued to ask this question to God prayerfully, I found myself running early on Sunday mornings along a running path that runs east and west through the middle of town. On Sunday mornings, there were people out on jogs, others were walking listening to music, while others were out walking their dogs. I began to ask God how to meet these runners and dog walkers where they are along this running trail.

In May 2017, I spoke to church leadership about what God had been revealing over the past several months about the community of Sonoma. The eldership met to pray together at a small park called Depot Park, located just north behind the Sonoma Square, along the running bike path. Ever since, I began going to Depot Park early on Sunday mornings and praying for the people of Sonoma, many of who were running past me. I prayed that God would meet them somehow, through Sonoma Valley Community Church or another church in the area. As I walked the path weekly, I saw new runners and dog walkers each day, but I also saw a few consistent walkers. With these locals, I exchange friendly eye contact as we walk past each other weekly. One of these locals is a woman around sixty-five years old who loudly sings with earphones in her ears. I hear a mixture of Tom Petty, The Eagles, or Rolling Stones sung every week. I often see an older distinguished Italian man in his late seventies walk past me weekly. We nod to each

other. I have prayed weekly that God would reach these people, these diverse people along this pathway since May 2017.

In June 2018, a new church was planted in a community building just thirty yards from Depot Park alongside the path I had been praying along for over a year. I went in before one of their first gatherings and found their lead planting pastor. I was able to pray with him and encourage him as he stepped out into this new adventure. I was able to say with delight that we at Sonoma Valley Community Church had been praying for the community of Sonoma right here in this very spot for over a year. We prayed to ask God to communicate grace and reach these people in whatever way was best. As the adventure of planting a new church began for this group, they were deeply encouraged to know that God had already been before them, by placing it upon our hearts to pray. Through the Depot Park prayer adventure, God invited us and others to participate in God's loving and redemptive activity in Sonoma.

Sonoma Cultural and Sub-cultural influences

The religious culture in Sonoma is spiritual (50 percent), but not religious (20 percent). People in this area are very open to the concept of spirituality as it takes on a variety of expressions derived from a diversity of people's opinions of what spirituality means. Spiritual conversations and the exploration of anything spiritual are everyday occurrences in Sonoma.²⁴ Advertisements of various kinds of spiritual workshops and seminars are on every crowded coffee house bulletin board in Sonoma. This predisposed

²⁴ Mission Insite, "Sonoma Valley."

openness in the area of spirituality is where some of my training as a spiritual director has become helpful in journeying with people outside the church.

Sonoma is both the name of the town I live in and the county in which I reside. A Sonoma County survey suggested that 36 percent of the people in the county are religious or affiliate somehow with organized religion.²⁵ This number is well below the state of California percentage of self-identifying religious of 45 percent and the national average of nearly 50 percent of Americans identifying as religious.²⁶ Of that 36 percent total of self-identifying religious people in the county of Sonoma, 23 percent identify as Roman Catholic.²⁷ This 23 percent highlights the Hispanic religious influence, which often has Roman Catholic ties and heritage in Sonoma County. About 8 percent of the population of Sonoma County identify as Protestant Christians,²⁸ which seems high for the actual city of Sonoma.

The ethnic makeup of Sonoma is 67 percent Caucasian with the next highest ethnic population being Hispanic at 28 percent.²⁹ An overlooked area of Sonoma is the Boyes Hot Springs area, located just north and west of the Sonoma city limit. Although technically being outside the city limits, Boyes Hot Springs has been associated with Sonoma for over one hundred years sharing the same postal code. Boyes Springs is where

²⁵ Best Places, “Sonoma, California,” accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.bestplaces.net/religion/city/california/sonoma> This study includes all people in the county that would identify with any religion.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Census.gov, “Sonoma County, California, accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sonomacitycalifornia,sonomacountycalifornia/PST045217>.

many of the overlooked Hispanic minority (28 percent) reside. I was fortunate to live with my family in Boyes Hot Springs. This area is teeming with life and energy. On any given night there will be three different Mexican food trucks (burrito wagons) parked within three blocks along with the two best Mexican restaurants in Sonoma.

Although the church building is only about three miles away, many of the people that live near and go to Sonoma Valley Community Church have missed intersecting with this growing population of Hispanic people living in and moving into Sonoma. Although this is the fastest growing segment of the population, for the most part, churches in Sonoma, except the Roman Catholic Church, have been ineffective in reaching out in tangible ways to this growing population.

Since January 2018, SVCC has been praying for ways that God may use them to reach out to this growing population of people. They desire to be able to somehow express the love of God to this demographic of people more effectively. Sonoma Valley Community Church has been unable to connect in any meaningful way with people of Hispanic origin over the past several years.

However, in March 2018, after a Sunday morning church gathering, I was met by a group of praying Christian people who had knocked on the door asking to talk with the pastor. When I came to the door, a group of Hispanic Christians began to explain that they had been praying for a place to gather for worship for many months, as their present worship space in a Boyes Springs apartment was not large enough to hold the growing Hispanic church plant. SVCC later offered the church plant a low rent for the use of the building with the desire to further partner in what God is doing through that church.

Although SVCC is predominately Caucasian, wealthy, highly educated, and retired, the church has made strides to connect with the greater community of Sonoma, both those who are similar in demographics and dissimilar. These connections hope to be a conduit of relationship to hopefully communicate the life-changing truth of God's love seen most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 2

CHURCH CONTEXT

In 2 Kings 22, there is a story of a priest named Hilkiah, who accidentally came upon the book of the law while renovations occurred to the temple building. The book of law had been previously overlooked and forgotten over the course of many years. This surprising discovery very much affected the Israelites under the leadership of king Josiah. The rediscovery was God's written word to and for his beloved people renovating and reinvigorating the people of God. This discovery also contributed to Israel's return to God under Josiah, reminding them who they were to be as God's chosen people. This written history was an important conduit to reveal God's faithfulness from previous generations, many of whom, had been long forgotten by the time of the discovery. This discovery of written history helped the people of God reaffirm their spiritual identity and gave them a greater narrative in which to trace and see the specific grace of God in their own lives in the past as well as into the future.

While doing some simple renovation in an unused, cluttered back office space at the church building annex, I surprisingly came across an old yellowed and tattered typewritten artifact. It was an original order of service for the celebration of thirty years

of ministry for Sonoma Valley Community Church. It was dated November 2, 1975. I smiled as I calculated that I was just three months old on the day of this celebration. This document, which retraced the critical milestones of God's faithfulness with SVCC, was for the most part previously unknown and long since forgotten.

Similar to a baton pass between consecutive track athletes competing in the same relay race, so too the initial spiritual DNA of SVCC has been handed off from one generation of leaders to another. This image of entrusting faith to the next generation in order to be taught and handed off to the next was used by the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 2:1-2: "You, then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." As I looked over the faith and hope shown in the first acts of faith by the church recorded on that tattered yellow piece of paper, I saw the same spiritual DNA that still exists within Sonoma Valley Community Church.

Ultimately, this movement of God to reconcile people to himself has been woven throughout human history. Thus, knowing where SVCC fits within the greater redemptive movement of God, helps make sense of the church's present landscape. By exploring the unique history of SVCC, leaders are listening for discerning insights into the particular ways in which God has already acted redemptively and continues to do so. Through the specific exploration of the church context of SVCC, might communicate and appropriately locate how and where the More of God Retreat finds its place within the more significant movement of God through Sonoma Valley Community Church.

Planting Grace: Church Beginnings in 1945

In June 1945, three people from Sonoma prayerfully sought help from a nearby church in Ripon, California, part of the Reformed Church of America, to begin a new church in Sonoma.¹ The document says that these three people approached the pastor in Ripon and “had a heart to heart talk” with him. Within a week, a local community center (located in Boyes Hot Springs) was rented as the temporary first gathering location for the new worshipping community on June 10, 1945. The church would later be named Grace Reformed Church.²

In the beginning or planting of any new church, there is much uncertainty, which requires a deep trust in God’s guidance, provision, and providence. In any new church plant, there are also many memorable firsts that occur throughout the first year that shape the future church. The tattered yellow piece of paper listed many important firsts for this infant church.

Before serving as lead pastor at SVCC, I was previously the lead pastor of a church plant in Oregon for over eight years. The gift of leading a new congregation through many firsts helped me appreciate this. These vital firsts were important to SVCC in how many of the things that happened in the first year shaped the passed on spiritual DNA of the church that continues.

The tattered yellow order of service entitled “Grace Notes,” helped to discover values through some of the highlights included in that document. Some of these firsts

¹ “Grace Notes,” 30th Anniversary Celebration of Sonoma Valley Community Church, Sonoma, CA, November 2, 1975.

² Ibid.

which the church experienced that initial year include the first Sunday School and home cottage prayer meeting. The congregation officially organized with ten families and nineteen members along with the election of leaders on November 2, 1945. The first baptisms occurred on November 25, 1945. One week later a sizable donation for the new building fund of twenty-five dollars was given toward the building of the present church building. The first minister, Chaplain Jack DeJong, was called at a congregational meeting held amidst candles and flashlights due to a roaring windstorm on January 14, 1946. Loans were quickly acquired for the purchase of land and the purchase of a parsonage. The newly acquired land on 2nd Street East in Sonoma was cleared of towering eucalyptus trees by church members on September 2, 1946, which is the same location the church building resides presently, seventy-four years later.³

SVCC Vision: To Know, to Grow, to Show

When I was called to pastor SVCC in December 2016, I was commissioned as a revitalization pastor. Discerning the movements of God is essential in any kind of revitalization process, taking seriously God the Holy Spirit and one's response-ability. I was asked in my initial interview by an elder, "Art if you become our pastor, what is the first thing you will do here at Sonoma Valley Community Church?" The response almost fell out of my mouth: "I will listen, I will listen. I trust that God has been and will continue to be at work here at Sonoma Valley Community Church. I hope that I would be able to listen to what God is already doing here so that our actions are in pace with God's movements and actions."

³ Ibid.

Partnering with SVCC's leaders to better define and shape the vision that God has given and is continuing to give the church for Sonoma has been of utmost importance. Thus, it is important to briefly discuss the vision of the church. This enlightens understanding of how and where the More of God Retreat might be located within the more significant movements of God at SVCC.

The first several months of pastoring involved listening to the stories of how God has used this church in the past and how God is continuing to use his church for his redemptive purposes presently. As leaders listened an important contextual image found in both the Bible and surrounding countryside emerged as an important image for SVCC.

The image of the grapevine found explicitly in John 15:5 emerged as a helpful image, as similar to the disciples, SVCC is surrounded by vineyards. Jesus states, "I am the vine, and you are the branches. If a person remains in me and I then they will bear much fruit, apart from me, you are unable to do anything." This verse has become a primary vision verse, informing how SVCC desires to relate to God and other people.

John 15:5 is one of the seven I AM⁴ statements in the book of John. In *Koine* Greek, in which the book of John was written, the phrase *ego eimi* translated "I . . . I Am," carried a powerful theological meaning in Jesus' first-century Jewish context. In *Koine* Greek, *ego* means "I," and *eimi* means "I Am." Yet, when brought together, "I . . . I AM" represents the very self-designation of God.

In Exodus 23, there is the story of God meeting Moses in a burning bush. As Moses begins to talk with God, God calls Moses to return to the most powerful nation in

⁴ Joel B. Green, Scott McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., "I AM SAYINGS," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 354-356.

the known world and demand the Pharaoh release the Israelite slaves. The Israelites were to be freed from oppression to worship God together in the desert. As Moses talks with God about this, Moses asks God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them? God said to Moses, ‘I am who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I Am has sent me to you’ (Ex 3:13-14). This self-designation of God, originally written in Hebrew was translated into the Greek of Jesus’ day in this unique way “*ego eimi*.” In today’s world it sounds like a stutter, “I . . . I Am,” but the Jewish people of Jesus’ day knew its importance. When Jesus uttered the words “*ego eimi*” in a first-century Jewish context, it was unmistakably clear who Jesus was claiming to be.

There are several places in John, where Jesus refers to himself in this unique way “*ego eimi*,” but there are only seven events where Jesus declares this statement with a predicate, “I AM the . . .”⁵ The declaration of “I Am” followed by an image helps readers understand the nature of God in a more comprehensive way. These seven metaphors or images of God, aid those who hear them to better understanding the character and nature of God. The image of an intimate union with Jesus depicted as the vine and branches, helped shape the vision of Sonoma Valley Community Church.

At SVCC the vision, with this verse as a backdrop, has been summed up in this way: “To Know the living God intimately, to Grow in the transforming grace of Jesus

⁵ There are twenty-nine times in John where Jesus is referenced as “*ego eimi*” or “I . . . I AM.” Of these occurrences, thirteen times there is a predicate that follows the declaration. An example of this would be “I am the bread of life.” There are seven specific I AM statements throughout the book of John. They are “I am the bread of life” (Jn 6:35), “light of the world” (8:12), “the door” (10:7), “the good shepherd” (10:19), “the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “the way, truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6), and “the true vine” (15:5).

Christ, and to Show the love of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, with our whole lives.”⁶

To know the living God intimately means much more than an intellectual knowledge about God. Colin Brown writes, “To know God means to enter into the personal relationship which he himself makes possible. Israel’s intimate relationship with God required that the nations’ conduct should correspond to God’s actions.”⁷ In the Old Testament Scriptures the Hebrew root word for knowledge or to know, “*Yada*,” has a broad application. This word has a connotation of intimacy as it reflects the various ways of knowing. The equivalent Greek root word, “*ginosko*,” also carries this understanding of not only an intellectual knowing, but also an intimate relational knowledge.

Second Peter 1:3-12 may also be helpful for a closer exploration of the church’s vision. It says:

His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has given to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This verse highlights that Christ’s follower have been given everything they need for a godly life through knowing the one who called them. This is done through Jesus’ power,

⁶ This vision statement was ratified at a Sonoma Valley Community Church Consistory Board (leadership team) meeting on June 14, 2017.

⁷ Colin Brown, ed. “*Knowledge*,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1969), 396.

presence, and promises. Christ's disciples have been called/invited into the best life possible right now, becoming partakers of the divine nature. Partaking of divine nature speaks of the intimate invitation offered by God, to participate in union with God.⁸ Jesus' coming into the world was not solely to save people from their sins; Jesus came to also invite them into a relationship where the very nature of God becomes their home address. Knowing God means to be united to God through responding to the invitation of participation with the living and active God.

To grow in the transforming grace of Jesus Christ emphasizes growing into whom one was created to become. Transformation is not of one's own resources but through the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Second Peter 1:5 intentionally links this intimate knowledge of Jesus to a clear call to make every effort. The critical phrase, "make every effort," has also been translated as, applying all diligence or earnestly giving one's all.

Paul is opposed to the idea that a persons' own actions or works can somehow independently earn or restore a relationship with God (Eph 2:1-10). Scripture affirms that it is only by grace that one has been saved, through a trusting relationship with God based upon his redemptive actions, not her own. A restored relationship with God is not constituted by one's good works but solely by God's goodness.

⁸ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 361. The theological doctrine of *Deification*, more commonly held among Orthodox Christians, emphasizes the union with God through Christ as "being taken up into the life of God." This soteriological view embraces not only Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, but also Jesus' incarnation as the redemptive work in which deification of humanity was made possible. The emphasis is less on legal images of atonement and more on the process of union with God as partakers of the divine nature. It is within this framework that Athanasius, the great fourth-century theologian once said in his book *On the Incarnation*, "For the Son of God became man [human] so that we might become God."

Right-relatedness to God is not opposed to earnest and sincere efforts and participation in applying with all diligence growing in one's relationship with God. Biblical Christianity calls people into this kind of loving pursuit. Without minimizing God's prevenient grace and activity in one's life, human effort is indispensable in growing spiritually, while human effort remains wholly inadequate on its own. Dallas Willard, speaking of God's transforming grace wrote, "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action. Grace, you know, does not just have to do with forgiveness of sins alone."⁹ Spiritual growth is propelled by Jesus' transforming grace, which in turn calls every transformed person into a whole-hearted response.

The final phrase in the vision statement of Sonoma Valley Community Church is to "Show the love of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, with our whole lives." A changed life becomes an agent of change. Second Peter 1:8 says, "For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." The words ineffective and unproductive are from the marketplace and agriculture worlds. Ineffective is a marketplace term alluding to being unemployed and has a connotation of being lazy or useless. Unproductive is an agricultural word with a sense of a barren fruit tree. They are both words with the negating Greek prefix "a," which contrasts it with the positive side of work and fruitfulness. The natural trajectory of a grace receiving life is an active and fruit producing life. These verses bring together an intimate knowledge of God, growth

⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teaching on Discipleship* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 61.

through God's transforming grace, and showing the love of God productively as the way to live and be in the world. Being agents of change in the world requires that one knows God intimately, grows in the transforming grace of Jesus Christ, and shows the Love of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, with his whole life.

Mission(s) Minded: A History of Global Missions

Sonoma Valley Community Church has historically been a church that supports and is active in cross-cultural mission(s). During my time at SVCC, we began to reframe the way we understood mission, as originating not in church activity, but first coming from the very heart of God. *The Missio Dei*, the Mission of God, unifies all loving activity in the name of God as mission. Historically at SVCC, mission(s) referred to activities the church did outside of its own walls and most often in other cultures. As such mission(s) was often unintentionally understood as a disconnected part of the local church. Understood in that way, mission(s) was a part of the church that engaged other parts of the world in the name of Jesus.

Throughout the first year, SVCC moved toward a more holistic and broader understanding of God's mission. Refining the term mission to refer more specifically to any redemptive activity of God was an intentional process in the first year. This redefinition highlighted that the one unified mission of God is to invite people into a relationship with the living God. Thus, any activity done across the street or around the globe is part of God's one mission - the one redemptive and unified movement of God, woven throughout human history. God's mission is not plural. To emphasize this, I often said publically, "The church does not have a mission, God's mission has a church." This

helped decentralize the church's role in mission and birthed a challenging question: "Are we presently living with God on mission?"

One action step that flowed from this new understanding of God's redemptive heart toward the world came about through understanding the church's first cross-cultural service trip to Mexico in April, 2018. I would often publicly say, "SVCC is going to serve in Mexico! Some of us are senders, and others of us are sent ones, but we are all going." This affirms that the impulse to go and serve redemptively, as a redeemed people, begins in the heart of God, flowing through the local church. The present action of going is only part of the one unified mission of God.

Drawing intimately near the heart of God has radical, immediate, and practical implications in the way the church redemptively and compassionately engages the world. The images of God explored on retreat can profoundly affect participants, as the mission of God is extended through various specific ministries across the street and around the world. The connection between knowing God and responding on mission with him reveals how the More of God Retreat and God's mission are interwoven together. For instance, as a retreatant spends time interacting with God as Shepherd, a shepherd who would pursue a lost sheep, the missional heart of God is both experienced and then replicated through her life. Those who are connected to God are also intimately connected to the same God who is on mission.

Leadership Revitalization Pathways: Elders, Deacons, Emerging Leaders

Upon accepting the call as a revitalization pastor at SVCC, the congregation worked through ten missional markers with which they would gauge growth toward

being healthy and missional.¹⁰ These missional markers have been clearly identified and are targets toward which the church is mutually moving. The More of God Retreat is part of the greater revitalization process and specifically addresses three of the missional markers. The three are Centrality of the Word of God, a Life Transforming Walk with Jesus, and Compelling Christian Community. The retreat is meant to offer space for participants to grow intentionally in these three areas.

The organized leadership at SVCC is the Consistory. The Consistory is made up of elected elders and deacons. Elders are elected to give oversight to the spiritual needs of the church, while the deacons are elected to oversee the physical needs and responsibilities of the church. They are elected yearly (two each year) for a three-year term. The group meets for prayer and collaboration monthly.

Of the Consistory, two of the six were able to participate in the emerging leaders' nine-month extended training. Over nine months, various topics were covered such as: writing a life story, knowing God/known ourselves, Gospel, grace, service, prayer, time management, church, courage, and power/humility. Each month focused on a different topic. The group grew through committing to read and discuss a monthly themed book as well as doing an accompanying action that reinforced the learning. During the themed month of prayer, the monthly action was to come on the More of God Retreat. The focus

¹⁰ The 10 Missional Markers are: Centrality of the Word of God (2 Tm 3:16), Life Transforming Walk with Jesus (Jn 3:3; Phil 1:6), Intentional Evangelism (Mt 28:18-20), Transforming Communities through Active Compassion, Mercy, and Justice Ministries (Mi 6:8), Global Perspective and Engagement (Acts 1:8), Compelling Christian Community (Acts 2:42-47), Heartfelt Worship (Ps 138:1; Jn 4:23), Sacrificial and Generous Living and Giving (Rom 12:1-8), Culture of Godly Leadership (Heb 13:7), Fruitful Organizational Structures (Acts 6:1-7; Ex 18:13-26).

of the retreat on biblical images of God with accompanying prayer practices contributes to the broader context of foundational leadership development within SVCC.

Reformed and Reforming: The Reformed Church in America (RCA)

The Reformed Church in America is one of the oldest Christian denominations in the US. Originally called the Dutch Reformed Church, the RCA's earliest church was begun in the US in 1624 within the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. Nearly forty years later, the colony was renamed by Great Britain to New York. While under British rule, the church was allowed to continue practicing within its Dutch Reformed roots. Although it has changed in many ways since 1624, the original church still maintains its affiliation with the RCA as well as its original ecclesial footprint in what is now New York City.¹¹

Sonoma Valley Community Church is part of the RCA, which traces its earliest theological and historical distinctiveness from John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In the *Institutes*, Calvin connects the reality of a person's image of God and his immediate response in prayer. In Calvin's *Institutes*, dedicated sections about times of prayer, patience perseverance in prayer, and God's perceived silence in prayer show Calvin's assumption that links a pray-er's images of God and the way they understand and practice interactive prayer.¹² Calvin encourages Christians to keep set times of prayer with a sincere and devoted heart to God.

¹¹ The Reformed Church in America, "A Brief Outline of RCA History," *The Reformed Church in America*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.rca.org/resources/rca-basics/brief-outline-rca-history>.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1 & 2*, Ford Lewis Battles, trans., John T. McNeill, ed., (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1960), 918.

He also warns pray-ers, in a sixteenth-century setting, against holding deformed images of God. Calvin warns against two distorted images of God. The first is God as a cosmic unforgiving money collector extracting prayer as some skewed form of debt repayment. The second distorted image is of God is a personal attendant of a wealthy master pray-er, as if God is obligated to do whatever whim comes to the mind of the pray-er/master.

Pastorally, Calvin saw how deeply and profoundly a person's view of God effected and affected the pray-er's whole way of life. He also instructs about the dangers of assuming that God is angry with a pray-er during occasions when God seems silent and unresponsive.¹³ He warns against the dangers of immediately assuming God's silence in prayer equates that God is distance or anger with the person who prays.

An Expanded Description of the More of God Retreat

Wherever a person is on their faith journey, she can always grow in her capacity to know God more through prayer. The More of God Retreat is an attempt to offer space to explore biblical images of God. This happens through an interactive relationship of prayer with God. The following paragraphs describe the More of God retreat more in-depth by answering: Who, What, Where, When, How, and Why.

Who: SVCC People and Others Desiring to Grow in their Relationship with God

This retreat is intentionally designed for the people who make up SVCC. The retreat focuses on biblical images of God, with the intention of offering space for people

¹³ Ibid.

to encounter God, wherever they may be on their spiritual journey. The retreat initially will be offered to those who attend Sonoma Valley Community Church and call it home. After several weeks of publicity and communication, it will be offered to the wider community of Sonoma and potentially to whoever may want to explore images of God in a contemplative setting.

The retreat is designed with many prayer onramps in order to facilitate a space for a variety of people to authentically connect with God. The retreat is open to any person desiring to meet with God, regardless of their previous spiritual history. Because of the intentional central focus on three biblical images of God, the retreat is facilitated within a Christian Trinitarian framework. The retreat assumes God's redemptive activity in the entire world, most clearly revealed and expressed through Jesus Christ. Because of this emphasis, the retreat has a possible evangelistic onramp toward anyone who has a spiritual hunger and desires to explore further "the God Jesus knows."¹⁴

What: A Retreat Exploring Biblical Images of God

The retreat will explore three biblical images of God: God as Shepherd, God as Woman/Mother, and God as Father. These images emerge from Jesus' three parables found in Luke 15 and are the foundation of each day's explored image of God. Selected Psalms and other Scripture will help the group further interact with these images of God. For example, Thursday evening through Friday afternoon are directed around God as Shepherd. This is explored not only in Luke 15: 5-7, but also Psalm 23.

¹⁴ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009). Smith often uses this phrase as he describes the way one's images of God are formed by the way Jesus spoke and lived in communion with God the Father. I too affirm this posture and approach to facilitating the retreat.

Although there will be ample space offered to engage with Scripture through an ancient meditative reading practice called *lectio divina*, the focus of the retreat prioritizes each person's direct interaction with God. There are blocks of uninterrupted time where the images of God have time to be discussed and processed with God and other retreatants in small groups. Thus, the retreat will not be chiefly concerned with the retreatant's acquisition of more discursive knowledge about God, although discursive knowledge of God is bound up in any experience of God and its interpretation. Prioritization will be given for space to interact in real time with the God, who retreatants are coming to not only know more about but coming to love more.

Ancient Prayer practices will be explored as pathways of knowing and loving God. The introduced images of God and spaces of prayer are offered as invitations into this transformative relationship with God. This prayer relationship is meant to pervade all human existence, extending beyond the retreat ultimately. Perhaps Roberta C. Bondi has said it best when she suggests that, "Prayer is a shared life with God. What we need most is to learn to live in an ordinary, everyday, routine way with the God we are learning to love."¹⁵ It will be in return to the everyday ebb and flow of life where retreatants become more attentive to God and God's loving activity.

The title of the retreat, More of God, comes from the desire to love and intimately know God more, with retreatants becoming whole selves. Through the redeeming of distorted images of God, the retreat hopefully becomes a space in which one's capacity

¹⁵ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love and to Pray Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 72.

for God's love is enlarged, expanded, and substantially extended into every area of life and social relationships.

Where: Mission Springs Retreat Center, Scotts Valley, CA

The retreat will take place at Mission Springs Camp. This camp has existed since 1926 and is owned and operated by the Evangelical Covenant Church, who previously was called "Mission Friends." The name "Mission Springs" came about by the occurrence that on this property is a natural spring of crystal clear water. Combining these two things, the name Mission Springs was adopted to emphasize Jesus' missional promise in John 4:14, given to the woman at the well, that he would create springs of living water welling up to eternal life from within her. The Samaritan woman left that conversation with Jesus changed, and her transformation affected the entire village.¹⁶ The camp name highlights the hospitable setting prepared in hopes that more prayerful conversations with Jesus may occur with those who come to play, pray, and pay attention to God. Jesus encounters essentially lead to impacting others through the love of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Gatherings will take place at Frontier Lodge. This lodge houses eight individual rooms with adjoining private bathrooms, and a central great-room where all group gatherings take place. The great room comfortably seats twelve-to-fifteen people in a square layout with a large fireplace beside the gather space. Group gathering times will always begin in the great room, but people will move for small group discussion times.

¹⁶ Mission Springs Camp and Conference Center, "Mission Springs History," July 8, 2018, <https://www.missionsprings.com/history>.

The center coffee table will have various objects for prayer and spiritual practices such as pictures and various prayer prompts. A large TV hangs over the fireplace to project images at a proper angle for seated participants to do group *visio divina*,¹⁷ or for visual meditation on an image. A window with natural light flanks the fireplace, which looks out into large redwood trees. A portable Bluetooth speaker will be utilized for group listening spaces aided through reflective music.

The retreat setting is a great place to have space to explore biblical images of God. Space is also conducive to pray at an unhurried pace and to be with God in a simple way. There are numerous walking trails and places to explore through the camp. God's creation points to God, and creation bursts forth with praise for God.¹⁸ The private rooms for each retreatant help facilitate the seventeen hours of shared silence (grand silence) toward the end of the retreat.

When: Three-day Retreat on September 27-30, 2018

The retreat will take place over three consecutive days, September 27 to 30, 2018. September provides a beautiful season to offer a retreat in California, as this is one of the most consistently beautiful months with pleasant temperatures. The fall season is often the best time to avoid morning fog on California coasts. The retreat center is about a two-

¹⁷ Similar to *lectio divina* or holy reading, *visio divina* or holy seeing, invites the participant into a prayerful, unhurried four-part movement similar to that suggested in the introduction of this paper. *Visio divina* involves seeing (*visio*) meditating (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*).

¹⁸ See Psalm 19:1, 96:11-13, which highlight the integral way in which God's creation points to God's character and glory. Similarly, a master artist creates paintings which reveal and point back to the uniqueness of the artist through the created painting.

hour drive from the church building in Sonoma but a five-minute drive to beaches and downtown Santa Cruz.

Beginning Thursday afternoon, participants will get situated into their private rooms. Around 4:00, the group will carpool to eat supper in nearby Santa Cruz. The group will gather for the first group gathering time at 7:00. The retreat schedule offers a detailed but flexible guideline for time together, with many days having a similar pattern.

In previous experience as both a participant and a facilitator of retreats, I have discovered that it usually takes a person about thirty-six hours to transition mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually into a slower, less busy, retreat space with God. Previous retreats I have guided, with a Friday evening to Sunday morning format, seem to have brought most participants up to thirty-six-hour threshold transition point, without allowing the person to be in that space with God for any amount of extended time.

This three-day (seventy-hour) retreat decision came through a conversation with Andrew Ranucci, who is an experienced retreat leader. He encouraged me to begin the retreat on Thursday instead of Friday, essentially doubling the retreat, and extending the retreat from thirty-six hours to nearly seventy hours. The length will be evaluated based upon the retreatants' experience and written reflection with the questionnaire.

How: Introducing Biblical Images of God by Teaching, Reflection, Leisure, and Prayer

The purpose of the retreat is to introduce or perhaps reintroduce biblical images of God in order that a person's intimate relationship with God has space for God to do whatever redeeming activity God desires to do. In some ways as a facilitator, I am merely playing a matchmaker, a person who knows two friends will be a perfect match and sets

up an environment where they can meet with one another. Perhaps that sounds juvenile, but that illustration highlights my understood role as a retreat leader or facilitator. It is simply to introduce, not to make anything necessary happen, to help participants become more aware of God, who has been and is already in the eternal now.

The introduction of biblical images of God will happen through teaching Scripture. William Barry writes, “Many people with an interest in religion have been traumatized by life and perhaps by false or inaccurate teachings about God. Their image of God is such that all they want is to keep on his right side or to keep as far away from God as possible.”¹⁹ By teaching Scripture and offering space for God the Holy Spirit to work, these inaccurate teachings may be reformed to healthier biblical understandings about the nature of God.

The teaching of the historical context and cultural background of the three parables of Jesus in Luke 15 will be a space offered for participants to identify their own thoughts about God. The biblical images of God teaching direct the participants to go “beyond the page and on to a person.”²⁰ The teaching about these parables helps prepare a pathway to encounter God in a transformative way.

The introduction of biblical images of God will happen through reflection. This intentional time for reflection is meant to be an interactive and unrushed space with the living God. The Ignatian prayer of Examen, a remembering prayer, is also introduced on the retreat as one of the prayer practices each evening. The Examen prayer “opens our

¹⁹ William A. Barry, *Finding God in all Things: A Companion to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991), 21.

²⁰ This phrase comes from Trevor Hudson, at a Doctor of Ministry Spiritual Direction Cohort lecture for Fuller Theological Seminary in Malibu, CA: September 2017.

eyes to God's daily self-revelation and increasingly clarifies for us our own responses to it."²¹ The prayer of Examen reviews the day sequentially with God. Through this exercise of reflection with God, a person can become increasingly attentive and free toward God's activity in his life that might otherwise be overlooked.

The application and further exploration of biblical images of God will become transformative through interactive spiritual practices, which help habituate love toward God. Throughout the retreat, there will be spaces to creatively respond to what God may be communicating through prayer practices such as praying with play-dough. This involves a person prayerfully responding to images or ideas that may arise from the times of gathered *lectio divina*. There will also be space offered to pray with over sixty black-and-white photographs of diverse people with a variety of facial expressions. Participants are invited to quietly look over the photographs asking God if there are any that they feel drawn to pick up. Different from most intercessory prayers offered at church gatherings, this spiritual practice invites participants to first pause, asking God to guide intercessory prayer, for whomever God may guide through the photograph. It requires the one who prays, to listen to God first, asking God for whom and how she is to intercede for those who come to mind. These prayer practices help bridge listening to God's voice with an intimate and personal response to God's activity in the world.

The introduction of biblical images of God will happen through leisure. It will be in the unstructured meanderings in which God will both seek and be sought by participants. Friday and Saturday afternoons are intentionally open for leisure time with

²¹ Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for our Lives Today* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2006), 21.

God. Whatever best suits the person on that particular day will be encouraged. Friday there will be a planned trip to spend time at a nearby beach during free time in the afternoon. Saturday a movie entitled “Gravity” will be offered for group viewing as it has many parallels with the life of prayer.

The hope is that introduction to these biblical images of God will direct each person toward a transforming friendship²² with God. Through time in solitude and with others journeying together, this deepening friendship with God will potentially expand into more areas of a person’s life, and that person may very well begin to experience significant changes in his life. The introduction of biblical images of God will lead to future invitations beyond the specific retreat. The retreat is not designed to be a one-time event, but a new beginning where lived practices as holy habits help reform and shape each person’s love of God, whom they are knowing through expanding images.

Why: Lives and Prayer are Shaped by a Person’s Primary Image of God

A.W. Tozer once said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”²³ In light of this, the question may arise, how is a person’s image of God shaped? Gerard Hughes writes,

Our notion of God is mediated to us through parents, teachers, and clergy. We do not come to know God directly. If our experience of parents and teachers has been of dominating people who show little affection or respect for us as persons, but

²² James Houston, *The Transforming Power of Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship with God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navigator Press, 1996).

²³ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1961), 1.

value us only in so far as we conform to their expectations, then this experience is bound to affect our notion of God and will influence the way we relate to God.²⁴

The adoption of images of God, through authority figures in a person's life, becomes the water colors from which one paints her images of God. However, this projection upon God certainly cannot be healthy. Brennan Manning, says, "For a disciple of Jesus, the process of spiritual growth is a gradual repudiation of the unreal image of God, and increasing openness to the true and living God."²⁵ This rejection and repudiation of false and unreal images of God is a process in which all disciples of Jesus Christ are invited.

In whatever manner these false images have been constructed, the process of discarding false images of God cannot be done primarily by a conscious decision. The way people relate to God is much more ingrained and entrenched in the conscious and unconscious patterns of cultural liturgies than most people realize. It requires a renewed relationship and new habits to open people up to the work of God's Holy Spirit.

The More of God Retreat offers space for the discarding of false images of God and tools for each participant to continue growing in the reconstructed images of God. This is accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit as biblical images of God are presented to participants. Spiritual practices are offered as ways of retraining their loves toward God. Through a growing friendship with God, unhelpful images of God can be discovered, challenged, discarded, and reformed to more healthy biblical images.

²⁴ Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Surprises* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 35.

²⁵ Brennan Manning, *Lion and the Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1986), 14.

The scope of this doctoral project is intentionally limited to the retreat, yet it is designed for life-long growth. Ongoing community and spiritual practice are essential. Continued spiritual growth opportunities beyond the retreat might include a small group of spiritual friends exploring together spiritual practices or Christian spiritual writings.

PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER THREE

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The following books have aided in the development, design, and implementation of the More of God retreat. These specific books have been selected because of their contribution in three broad areas influencing the retreat. These areas are images of God, prayer, and the spiritual accompaniment of the retreatants.

A central aim of the retreat is to offer space for retreatants to spend unhurried time with God, to become more aware of their own operational images of God. The following books have helped influence the approach and the design of the retreat. *Will the Real God Please Stand Up: Healing our Dysfunctional Images of God* by Carolyn Thomas has offered an essential biblical exposition of key passages of Scripture that has shaped the content of the retreat. *Lion and the Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* by Brennan Manning, and *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in love with the God that Jesus Knows* by James Bryan Smith, emphasize the life of Jesus as the primary hermeneutical lens to rightly understand the Godhead. The above three books focus specifically upon a person's held images of God and how that holistically affects their entire life.

The Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard and *Prayer* by Richard Foster have helped form the foundation for understanding how spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, silence, and solitude, become a graced pathway toward a greater capacity for the life of God within a believer. Willard and Foster both lay the important groundwork in understanding the relationship of spiritual disciplines as ways to open up to the Holy Spirit's transforming work. *The Critical Journey* by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich has helped design a spiritually hospitable retreat, giving individual attention to people entering the retreat at various stages in their spiritual journey.

***Will the Real God Please Stand Up* by Carolyn Thomas**

Carolyn Thomas' book originates from a pastoral concern, that after many years of ministry, "The major problem is not that people do not love God; rather, the point at issue is that they have never known the real God. In not knowing this God, many persons have become bitter, while others have agonized with the mistaken idea that because of something they have done, God no longer loves them."¹

Thomas' premise is that a person's collective life of negative experiences with parents and other people erodes personal trust. These adverse experiences of distrust become the primary default way in which adult people understand and relate to God. If a person never felt like she was good enough as a child, or if she was neglected and felt worthless from her parents, this then becomes the lens of experience from which she often views God. Thomas challenges the notion that children are not like sponges, which

¹ Carolyn Thomas, *Will the Real God Please Stand Up: Healing our Dysfunctional Images of God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), vii.

“passively absorb whatever society pours on them. They [children] meet their social experiences with cognitive structures that help them interpret those experiences in a way that makes sense to them as children.”² If a young person has a family history of distrust, abuse, and infidelity, it can ultimately become a seedbed for distorted and untrue images of God to germinate and grow.

Another factor in the distortion of images of God comes from people who are “victims of unauthentic religious teachings.”³ This kind of teaching often centers upon behavior and depicts God as a capricious and wrath-filled God, who is eager to punish for any kind of infraction or sin. In essence, a loving God is set aside for a God who “would be faithful only to those who merited [God’s] fidelity by their good lives.”⁴

The present dilemma of many people’s dysfunctional image of God is often formed early in human existence. It experientially affects and effects almost everything a person thinks and does. Thomas goes on to pose this question: “How can a person whose early life experiences evolved amidst one or more of the dysfunctional family situations described above (often accompanied by distorted religious education) ever comprehend the notion of a God who is consistently faithful? How can they perceive a God whose love for us persists regardless of whether we return to that love or not?”⁵

Elsewhere she writes, “As human beings with only human images as models or symbols of God, no image can possibly convey God’s complete and true reality. Every

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid.

symbol limps in that it limits God who is limitless love.”⁶ Thomas explores multiple images of God, but first explores the life of Jesus. She states “Jesus, who was the human presence of God’s love among us, acted counter to the expectations of Jews who followed the norm of first century Pharisaic thinking.”⁷ Thomas’ skillful exegesis and hermeneutics become apparent as she further explains Gospel stories about Jesus and their essential link to understanding the true nature of God. Through these stories, Thomas explains how Jesus challenged the fundamental assumptions and influence of skewed religious and sociological standards during his time.

In chapter four, she offers biblical images of God as a tender parent (father and mother), a loving shepherd, a caring Physician, and God-among-us in Jesus. She develops these images and further expands their implications for followers of Jesus Christ. This chapter is helpful in preparing to teach on biblical images of God presented in the More of God Retreat.

The book’s strengths are evident in Thomas’ masterful exegesis of Scripture. Her ability to explain biblical concepts and their implications is outstanding. She does this consistently throughout the book. Thomas also does not aim only at aiding a person in reforming his images of God, but in the epilogue, considerable content is dedicated to exhort people away from a self-centered focus and toward a deep trust in a God who meets him through grace conveying images.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

Possibly the greatest strength in the book comes from her vital link and connection between a reshaping of a person's image of God and its connection to new freedom in prayer. Thomas suggests:

Insight into God's fidelity [image of God's faithfulness] to us affects our whole lives. Integration of the realization of a loving and faithful God makes prayer, for example, freer and more spontaneous. Though prayer is sometimes formal, it need not always be so. Basically, prayer is a mutual communication with God who is our constant companion, one in whom we can pour out our heart's love and joy, fears and regrets, desires and hopes, and to whom we listen in turn.⁸

One of the drawbacks of the book, as it relates to my project, is Thomas' exegesis and explanation of the Luke 15 parable of the shepherd and the lost sheep. Although she tries to maintain the image of a loving shepherd throughout Jesus' Luke 15 parable, the interpretation and explanation of the shepherd abandoning the ninety-nine sheep in the open field is unintentionally incomplete and potentially damaging.

Further studies by Keneth Bailey⁹ indicate that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the open field because those sheep are never left alone. Shepherds always watched groups of sheep together, in the same way, teachers would not watch a group of ninety-nine children on a playground by themselves. Bailey sheds light on the primary and consistent emphasis of the parable which is the attention and concern the Shepherd has for all of his sheep, and the great lengths which the shepherd will go to bring one back home.

⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁹ Keneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983).

Lion and the Lamb by Brennan Manning

In his unique and creative way, Brennan Manning writes a piercing book about the importance of having a correct image of a lavishing and loving God. Delving deeply into the Gospel accounts of Jesus' interaction with God his father, Manning lays out the practical and personal implications of a loving God who is similarly available. Manning laments that the reality of a loving and available God has been skewed in today's culture:

Over the past fifteen years my ministry has been identified more than anything else, with healing our image of God. Teachings on the unconditional love of God, Abba, Father, have aimed at dispelling illusions and myths and helping people to experience the God of Jesus Christ. This, I believe, is the main business of religion. Religion is not a matter of learning how to think about God, but of actually encountering Him.¹⁰

While immersing himself in the biblical narrative of God, Manning highlights how "the parables of Jesus reveal a God who is consistently overgenerous with His forgiveness and grace."¹¹ Flowing from this reforming image of God, a life of faith and greater freedom is lived. Freedom comes not only in the acceptance of new images of God, communicated most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ, but also in the active rejection and recycling of distorted images of God. Manning suggests that "for a disciple of Jesus the process of spiritual growth is a gradual repudiation of the unreal image of God, an increasing openness to the true and living God."¹² The More of God Retreat is one avenue where these unreal images of God can become challenged and increasingly reshaped through encountering God.

¹⁰ Manning, *Lion and the Lamb*, 13.

¹¹ Ibid., 17.

¹² Ibid., 14.

By emphasizing the importance of healing one's image of God, the process of a persons' spiritual transformation into Christlikeness is thus, not the result of rugged determination, but the supernatural residue of intimacy with the living God. Manning says, "It is always true to some extent that we make our images of God. It is even truer that our image of God makes us. Eventually, we become like the God we imagine."¹³ This pattern suggests that a person's deeply held image of God, whatever that may be, drastically informs and shapes the lived experiences of that person. The experience of the mother lovingly holding her agitated child enabled that child to be aware of his mother's love in the midst of the hard circumstance.

It is fitting that one of the first suggestions proposed by Manning toward the unearthing, challenging, and altering of one's images of God, is through the spiritual practice of solitude. Manning explains that solitude often takes a person into new territory challenging her need to control and dictate her relationship with God. Manning says,

The first step in solitude is to divest ourselves of our preconceived ideas of what a retreat should be like. Our unrealistic expectations are grist for the mills of neurosis: "What am I doing wrong? Why can't I find God?" We get so busy deciding what advice to give God about how to relate to us, so set in our needs and expectations that we are unable to hear God's voice in the messages He is sending us right now. Our prayer becomes merely an expression of our own illusions.¹⁴

This book is helpful toward the shaping of the More of God Retreat in its essential link between people's held images of God and their lived life and interactions with others. In chapter nine, which shares the same title as the book, "Lion and Lamb: The

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 53.

Relentless Tenderness of Jesus,” Manning explains the meaning of the Greek word *splagchnozomai* which carries with it vivid imagery.¹⁵ The word literally means intestines or guts, the location in which a person’s most deeply felt beliefs emerge. In this sense, *splagchnozomai* is the anatomy of compassion. Thus, the *splagchnozomai* compassion expressed in the person of Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry is only a glimpse of the compassion of God, a knowable fraction of a whole unfathomable reality.

The *splagchnozomai* of Jesus, or as Manning refers to it as relentless tenderness is often not accepted by Christians. He continues by saying, “One of the most shocking contradictions in Christian living is the intense dislike many disciples of Jesus have for themselves. They are more displeased, impatient, irritated, unforgiving, and spiteful with their own shortcomings than they would ever dream of being with someone else’s.”¹⁶

Manning’s book is a helpful contribution to laying the groundwork for the More of God prayer Retreat and the various ways in which a person’s image of God affects his faith.

The Good and Beautiful God by James Bryan Smith

James Bryan Smith carefully and masterfully authors one of the best contemporary books about images of God. One of the most helpful contributions from his book is his triangle of transformation. The triangle prioritizes the role of the Holy Spirit as the source of real transformation as it relates to “(1) changing the stories in our minds, (2) engaging in new practices (3) in reflection and dialogue with others who are on the

¹⁵ Ibid., 126.

¹⁶ Ibid., 132.

same path.”¹⁷ This foundational chapter helps clarify that spiritual transformation is not merely a matter of human willpower. Smith accurately locates the relationship between the Holy Spirit and adopting the narratives of Jesus, engaging in soul-training exercises, and participating in Christian community¹⁸ as they open the person up to further soul renovation. These three indirect actions, empowered and enabled by the Holy Spirit, set the theological foundation for the remainder of the book.

Chapters two through seven insightfully explore the characteristics of “the God that Jesus revealed.”¹⁹ Chapter two wrestles with the reality of God’s goodness amongst the backdrop of suffering and evil in the world. Chapter three builds off of the previous chapter of God’s goodness and how that fundamentally influences a person’s ability to trust God. Smith proposes, “It does not matter that God is all-powerful and all-knowing if he is not all-good. If he isn’t all good, I will never be able to love and trust him.”²⁰ He correlates the reality of knowing God as a trustworthy father and having a life of thanksgiving.

Chapter four proposes that God is generous, beyond humanity’s wildest imaginations. In so doing, Smith carefully extracts an often held belief about God by many Christians, namely “God is good, you are bad, try harder.”²¹ This statement comes from a belief that one can earn God’s love and grace, by approved behavior, with the

¹⁷ Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 24.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The God Jesus knows is an often repeated phrase throughout the book.

²⁰ Ibid., 56.

²¹ Ibid., 80.

lurking belief that God only offers grace to those who deserve it. Ironically, grace is by its definition favor offered to those who do not deserve or earn it. Smith further develops a more robust view of God as one who is generous as opposed stingy, a God who is eager to give from the source of every good and perfect gift. He writes, “Generosity then flows from either a sense of abundance or a feeling of compassion. God is moved by both. God is generous because he lives in a condition of abundance—his provisions can never be exhausted—and God is moved with compassion because he sees our need.”²²

Chapters five, six, and seven speak to three attributes of God: God is Love, God is Holy, and God is Self-giving. In chapter five, Smith contrasts the love of God with an often held image of a legalistic God. A legalistic false God is scrupulous and preoccupied with religious performance, thus a legalistic person, a person assuming God’s love comes from their proper behavior, is also preoccupied with religious performance. Smith guides the reader through the often referred to parable of the prodigal son told by Jesus in Luke 15. This story, which “should really be called the parable of the father’s love, because the word prodigal means, ‘recklessly extravagant’”²³ is one of the parables enlisted in the More of God prayer retreat. The real narrative of God, what this parable highlights is, “That even the worst of our sins will not prevent God from loving us or stop God from longing for our return. The parable is not so much about a sinner getting saved as it is about a God who loves even those who sin against him.”²⁴

²² Ibid., 84.

²³ Ibid., 99.

²⁴ Ibid., 101.

By working through the attributes of God's love and holiness, Smith brilliantly acknowledges the pitfalls of extreme and polarizing images of God. Two such untrue images are an angry and wrath-filled God or God as an aloof, morally indifferent God who does not care about sin and evil in the world. Smith openly states, "Integrating God's love and God's wrath is difficult. Most people don't, they just decide to go one way or the other."²⁵ His distinction between God's love and holiness as permanent attributes of God, and God's wrath, which is not a permanent attribute but occasioned by his settled response against objective moral evil²⁶ is helpful. In chapter seven, Smith lays out the essential connection between acts of self-sacrifice and how that reveals true love.

In the final two chapters of the book, chapter eight entitled "God Transforms" and chapter nine entitled "How to Make a Pickle," Smith lays out a practical framework for God's process of transformation and exhorts the reader to enter into this process wholeheartedly. Each chapter in the book has a soul-training exercise. This added section helps the reader more fully integrate the teaching of the book through actions that open people up to encounter with God. This book is offered to those on retreat as a small group resource potentially continuing beyond the retreat.

***The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard**

Opening this book, Dallas Willard writes, "The Spirit of the Disciplines is nothing but the love of Jesus, with its resolute will to be like him whom we love."²⁷ Willard is

²⁵ Ibid., 118.

²⁶ Ibid., 121.

²⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, xii.

straight forward in his assertion that, “We can become like Christ by doing one thing—by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself.”²⁸ The book aims to explain the correlation between a loving relationship with God and how the practice of spiritual disciplines contributes to this growing relationship. Willard offers a compelling vision of living like Jesus, connecting spiritual disciplines as gifts of grace.

A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom. When we understand that grace (*charis*) is gift (*charisma*), we then see that to grow in grace is to grow in what is given to us of God and by God. The disciplines are then, in the clearest sense, a means to that grace and also to those gifts. Spiritual disciplines, “exercises unto godliness,” are only activities undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of his life and power without harm to ourselves or to others.²⁹

Willard outlines his book by saying, “The chapters that follow are written to aid you in understanding the absolute necessity of the spiritual disciplines for our faith, and the revolutionary results of practicing these disciplines intelligently and enthusiastically through a full, grace-filled, Christlike life”³⁰

The world, through the modern and post-modern ages, can be described as an “age of revolution.”³¹ Revolutions, in both corporate and individual spheres, are responses to human suffering in the world. Attempts to change the causes of suffering in the world fall short because the genesis of the causes are not primarily political, physical, ethnic, or socio-economic. Although human suffering indeed occurs in these spheres, a

²⁸ Ibid., ix.

²⁹ Ibid., 156.

³⁰ Ibid., xii.

³¹ Ibid., iix.

transformation of the human person and its corporate effects, is the only way to change the causes of human suffering ultimately. Change begins with a person's transformed relationship with God and the entire cosmos. Historically, the Church has a less than stellar resume as it applies to human transformation. Willard suggests that believers living in the “character and power”³² of Jesus Christ are still the only way for an authentic transformation of a person and society to happen.

This project will be aided in Willard's theological discussion of how spiritual disciplines are naturally located in a living, grace-filled relationship with God. Locating spiritual disciplines within the Kingdom of God, salvation is thus understood as a redeemed life ordered around a loving relationship with God. Spiritual disciplines are embodied and concrete responses to God's active love. Willard has two images about how spiritual disciplines relate to the Christian life that will be very helpful for those on retreat. The first is an athletic image highlighting a professional athlete's game preparation, by contrasting an athlete simply that is trying something as opposed to intentional training.³³ Another constructive image is the natural breathing motion of inhaling and exhaling.³⁴ This image shows how the two general categories of spiritual disciplines; abstinence and engagement, roughly relate to each other as ways of growth with God.

Willard's discussion upon some of the more common and “main” spiritual disciplines is helpful in the experiential nature of the retreat. For instance, the discipline

³² Ibid., ix.

³³ Ibid., 3-4.

³⁴ Ibid., 175-176.

of silence and solitude are discussed not only in private practice and setting but also in a corporate setting. This discussion has helped shape the extended time of silence and solitude practiced on the last day of the retreat.

Prayer by Richard Foster

Richard Foster's book "is about a love relationship: an enduring, continuing, growing love relationship with the great God of the universe."³⁵ The book discusses twenty-one different ways to pray. It illustrates the breadth of prayer experiences and how these various avenues of prayer uniquely shape the one praying.³⁶ Foster begins with the premise that prayer has its beginning and ending in a relationship with God. He says, "Overwhelming love invites a response. Loving is the syntax of prayer. To be effective pray-ers, we need to be effective lovers."³⁷ Foster imagines God's heart as a spacious home, to which all are eagerly invited. The doorway to God's heart is Jesus Christ with the key being prayer.³⁸ The exploration of various kinds of prayer ordered into a Trinitarian movement of Inward, Upward, and Outward is how the book's structure further develops prayer as a loving relationship with God.³⁹

The structure of the book highlights three particular movements correlating with the Trinity. Foster says that,

³⁵ Foster, *Prayer*, 3.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 1-2.

³⁹ Ibid., xii.

The movement inward (Part I) is prayer to God the Son, Jesus Christ which corresponds to his role as Savior and Teacher among us. The movement upward (Part II) is prayer to God the Father, which corresponds to his role as sovereign King and eternal Lover among us. The movement outward (Part III) is prayer to God the Holy Spirit, which corresponds to his role as Empowerer and Evangelist among us.⁴⁰

One of the most helpful contributions to the prayer retreat project is how Foster begins with the love of God as the origin of sincere prayer. His opening allusion of God's heart as a home implies a correlation between the loving heart of God (image) and the practice of prayer (spiritual discipline) as a response to this love. It resonates with this project's thesis concerning the importance of held images of God and spiritual practices that flow from these images.

The retreat will focus on a variety of the prayers Foster discusses. Significant time and space is offered in learning and practicing these styles of prayer in a group setting. Chapters such as "The Examen Prayer," "Unceasing Prayer," "Meditative Prayer (*Lectio Divina*)," "Intercessory Prayer," and "Contemplative Prayer" are some of the specific types of prayers addressed on the retreat. Because of Foster's accessible writing style, the concepts and teaching are very applicable to the retreat context. The short explanations of the various styles of prayer along with his imagery and sample prayers ending each chapter is why this book is recommended as an excellent resource for additional reading after the retreat.

⁴⁰ Ibid., xii.

One of the limitations of the book as it relates to this project is Foster's choice of chapter titles. Titles such as "Sacramental Prayer" and "Covenant Prayer"⁴¹ might be potentially misleading titles for people who may associate these titles with more traditional or theological definitions. In addition to this, the chapter entitled, "The Prayer of Examen"⁴² leaves out one of the most important contributors, Ignatius of Loyola, from the explanation and discussion. This absence is one of the few drawbacks to this book's excellent introduction to various styles of prayer.

The Critical Journey by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich

"The Critical Journey is, at its core, a description of the individual's spiritual journey; our response to or faith in God with the resulting life changes."⁴³ Contrasting the analogies of a journey and a trip, the writers suggest that, "A journey involves a process, action, movement, change, experiences, stops and starts, variety, humdrum, and surprises. . . . Whereas a trip focuses primarily on a destination, a journey has significance when seen as a whole. Journeys are dynamic, not static."⁴⁴

The writers' primary argument is that there are specific stages in the life of faith, which have some distinctive characteristics. They acknowledge the tension of both the mystery and predictability of a person's spiritual development which, "is deceptively

⁴¹ Perhaps a better descriptive title for Sacramental Prayer could be better Liturgical Prayer and a more descriptive title for Covenant Prayer could be Alter Prayer.

⁴² Foster, *Prayer*, 27-35.

⁴³ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Salem, WI, Sheffield Publishing, 2005), xxi.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

simple and at the same time highly complex.”⁴⁵ They insightfully observe, “All journeys are similar, all journeys are different.”⁴⁶

Hagberg and Guelich trace six stages of faith. They are: Stage 1 (Recognition of God), Stage 2 (Life of Discipleship), Stage 3 (Productive Life), Stage 4 (Journey Inward), Stage 5 (Journey Outward), Stage 6 (Life of Love). In addition to these stages, they also discuss “The Wall,” which most closely relates to the movement between Stage 4 (Journey Inward) and Stage 5 (Journey Outward).⁴⁷ Although all begin the critical journey sequentially at stage 1 (Recognition of God), the journey is fluid and cumulative, with people often moving back and forth along stages previously entered with God.

A person also may be in two different stages at the same time, reflecting characteristics of both stages. People generally tend to operate from a home stage in which they presently live. Transitioning from one stage to another often involves feelings of being stuck or caged. A personal sense of crisis sometimes accompanies transitions through stages as a person draws closer to God in their journey of faith.

A person begins their critical journey with recognition of God (stage 1), accepting the reality of God in their lives with a sense of awe and need. A person continues the journey by learning more about God in a life of discipleship (stage 2) and belonging to a faith community. The productive life (stage 3), is marked by a movement from student to teacher. A greater understanding of one’s gifts emerges with a desire to offer oneself responsibility to be used by God.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., xxv.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 17.

Characteristic of the journey inward (stage 4) is an unsettling rediscovery of God, with its abrupt shift toward questioning and the shedding of previously held certainties. This rediscovery of God involves a more profound and personal encounter with God, which the authors call The Wall. The Wall is a place where a person's will struggles directly with God's will. Although mysterious, unique, and challenging to describe, going through The Wall involves discomfort, ambiguity, perplexity, and ultimate surrender. This acceptance of God's love and softening toward a person's deformed images of God and false areas of personal strength and self-worth ultimately results in a greater humility toward and healing with God.

The journey outward (stage 5) begins as a person "surrenders to God's will to fully direct their lives, but with our eyes wide open, aware but unafraid of the consequences,"⁴⁸ of living out God's purposes for their inner lives in the world.⁴⁹ The Life of Love (stage 6) is best described as "having lost ourselves in the equation, and at the same time we have truly found ourselves."⁵⁰

This book is an excellent model of spiritual formation and aided understanding of the stages in the journey of faith and to better understand people at various stages of their faith journey. For instance, when introducing the Jesus Prayer as a form of breath prayer at the retreat, people at various faith stages of faith may respond in very different ways. A person in stage 3 (the productive life) might dislike the prayer and opt for something less passive and more active for God. A person at the Wall (discomfort, perplexity) may

⁴⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 136-137.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 152.

struggle with a restlessness that arises in the stillness of a breath prayer. While a person who is in stage 6 (the loving life), may be familiar with this kind of prayer and settle into this practice effortlessly. So the way one introduces, invites, offers reflection questions, and listens to a group's experience is influenced by her awareness of people's home stage of faith as they enter a retreat time.

The Stages of Faith in Spiritual Formation⁵¹ section is also beneficial as it suggests spiritual practices and questions for people at various stages. These thoughtful practices are important in constructing a retreat plan of spiritual formation exercises that may be most beneficial for people in certain stages of faith on the prayer retreat.

A potential drawback in any attempt to specify and describe a spiritual process is the over-application of stages in order to size up another person spiritually. The possible over-application is a flaw of the author and is inherently possible in other excellent books about describing the process of spiritual formation.⁵² Also, the book does not directly address (perhaps indirectly in the final chapter entitled questions and answers) how unchosen, outward causes, such as prolonged sickness, isolation, or socio-economic conditions might contribute to a person's present home stage. The most significant demographic division in my faith community is socio-economic. I wonder how a person's financial affluence could potentially obscure the home stage of faith of a person.

These books have been beneficial in preparing a retreat exploring images of God. Along with images of God, the books have also assisted in the practice of prayer as an

⁵¹ Ibid., 162-184.

⁵² Such as Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* and James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*. Over-application of the stages takes the focus off union with God and places it on some other spiritual goal.

environment to foster the changing images of God. Having an idea of where people generally are in their journey of faith has also helped in offering appropriate and helpful practices and guidance depending upon where a person presently finds themselves on their journey of faith with God.

CHAPTER FOUR

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF PRAYER

It was Christmas time, and we were living in a new country. A few months earlier my wife Jenny and I, along with our two young children, 4-year-old Emma, and 1-year-old Sam, had left the US and immigrated to Canada. Our family ventured to a ski resort on the top of a mountain, and Santa Claus was about to make a guest appearance. Before Santa arrived to hear requests, Emma wanted to go ice skating. I went with her while Jenny held our infant son. Jenny's willingness to stay behind with Sam proved strategic, for I found out later that she was excited to take memorable photos of my possible awkward crash landings. Unless you grow up ice skating, as many Canadians do, it is an activity that takes getting used to doing. Skating is not something that everyone feels confident doing immediately.

I was a reasonably coordinated athlete through high school with some previous experience on various kinds of skates, but the moment I got on the ice I knew I was in a whole new universe. Professional figure skaters and hockey players seem to glide so smoothly as they fly across the ice, moving much faster than they ever could by merely walking or even running. Although most people learn to walk before ice skating, the way

an ice skater glides is counterintuitive to walking. Ice skating involves a different motion and movement altogether.

I was not learning this new skill nearly as quickly as my cute and determined 4-year-old daughter. She picked it up quickly. I wondered if it was because she just had a natural gift for it, a lower center of gravity, or because she was less conditioned by walking for only three years instead of thirty years. Whatever excuse I was attempting to come up with, my insecurities grew as my confidence diminished.

After my first few epic falls on the ice, I became concerned about potential injuries, not only to myself but to others as well. I pondered an odd thought: “If someone was accidentally stabbed with one of my skates, could I be charged with murder or involuntary manslaughter?” My falls were quite spectacular with ice skates reaching eye-level in multiple directions as my arms flailed to retain some sense of balance on the slippery surface.

Ironically, I was on the ice to help Emma, when in reality she was skating circles around me making sure to stay a safe distance away from my unpredictable ice skates. The smirks of the more accomplished skaters communicated to me that I did not belong on the ice. Discouraged, I felt the urge to leave the ice, take off my skates, and start walking back to the US. Although I continued to feel a bit foolish, wobbly, and uncoordinated, I stayed skating on the ice with Emma. I am glad I stayed.

Learning to ice skate and learning to pray have some striking similarities. They both require people to learn new ways to relate to new encounters, both ice and direct communication with God can seem daunting. A person must risk feeling a bit wobbly as

they unlearn some previously held ways of moving their feet and interacting with God in new ways. There may be seasons when pray-ers feel like they are effortlessly gliding in exhilaration. At other seasons, pray-ers may experience no sense of movement at all awkwardly standing motionless. Still, at other times pray-ers might feel a lack of confidence and feel unstable because God, like ice, is so unpredictable. Lack of experience, feelings of wobbliness, or discouragements from perceived failures, cannot ultimately prevent people from growing in their relationships with God if they simply stay put on the ice. The remainder of this chapter, explores biblical teaching about prayer and various characters who “stayed on the ice” with God.

Whenever attempting to speak about God a tension exists. The very practice of Christian theology begins with what is communicated about God in Christian Scripture. When a person is visually communicating something, two options are still photographs and movies. Both are important, but the movie gives a fuller context than a still picture. The Bible enlists multiple literary genres and metaphors, in an attempt to describe, the indescribable God.

Theology is sometimes portrayed through narrative (movie) and at other times through clear, descriptive statements (photograph). Attempts to define God with static adjectives (photograph) certainly have merit, but it is often in the dynamic communication (movie) of God with image and interaction, where God’s character is most accessible. For this reason, the More of God Retreat prioritizes the biblical genres of narrative and psalms to assist participants in encountering God for themselves.

One example is in the understanding of God's *hesed*¹ or loyal "loving-kindness." To refer to God's *hesed* love is a helpful way (photograph) to speak of God but it is general and without a dynamic context. Speaking of God's *hesed* in the living context of the Old Testament story of Hosea and Gomer (movie) unveils God's love-in-motion more vividly.²

The next several pages will explore a biblical theology of prayer. It begins briefly laying a theological foundation of God revealing himself throughout history and most clearly in the person of Jesus the Christ. It then narrows scope to survey a few important Old Testament narratives, Psalms, and moments in the life of Jesus. Selective priority is given to stories and teachings that have a narrative or poetic expression which seem to connect a person's image of God to their life of prayer.

Although there is much more excellent teaching on prayer throughout the Bible, this chapter's focus is with the primary passages that are explored at the retreat. This section concludes by discussing three parables of Jesus. The concluding three parables from Luke 15 are the central biblical images for the More of God Retreat.

The story of God, expressed in Christian Scripture, is about his loving reign over his beloved creation. Originally described in Genesis 1-2, God's intention of an intimate relationship with humanity is woven throughout the entire Bible. Sadly, Scripture reveals

¹ *Hesed* refers to God's loyal loving-kindness. It is referred to over twenty times in the book of Psalms, yet God's *hesed* love is most clearly shown in the narrative of Hosea chapters 2 and 3.

² In the book of Hosea, God's *hesed* love is told through the heartbreaking story of Hosea, who shows this forgiving, pursuing, *hesed* love to his wife Gomer, who has broken relationship and betrayed trust. The story more than tells of God's *hesed*; it displays it. For this reason, the prayer retreat will be focusing upon biblical images of God which are anchored in a story/parable and reveal the character of God in a movie-style way through metaphor.

how humans have all sinned by turning away from God,³ distorting and darkening people's images of God.⁴ Idolatry⁵ in all its destructive forms leads to misrepresenting and misinterpreting God to humanity's self-inflicted demise.⁶ People's deformed images of God lead to an individual person's deformed self-understanding and purpose, disconnected and relationally separated from God, the true source of all life.

Central to God's story, is the redemptive action of God, in and through his one and only Son Jesus Christ. Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection certainly deal once and for all⁷ with humanity's rebellion through reconciliation and regeneration. Profoundly, Jesus' life offers both: humanity's greatest example of human life in relationship with God⁸ and the most reliable visible image of the invisible God.⁹

³ At its core sin is a rebellion against the loving Reign of God. Sin is both a condition of a person's heart/mind/will/affections and is also the practical expressions of that conditions in a person's thoughts, words, and deeds. See Gn 3; Ps 14:1-3, Rom 3:23; 1 Jn 1:10, Gal 5:19-21.

⁴ See Ephesians 4:17-19 where people's darkened understandings of God directly effects their thoughts and actions.

⁵ Isaiah chapters 40:1-44:23 is a prophetic interplay for the deconstruction of false idols (images) and their misrepresentation of God and the reconstruction of images of God rightly representing God's character. See Indictment against Idolatry: 44:6-23; 40:18-20; 42:17, 41:7 and images of God as kind shepherd (40:11) restorer (40:29-31) Redeemer helper (41:13-14) Mighty Warrior (42:13) Forgiver (43:25) Creator (44:1-2) King (44:6). See also the warning in 1 Jn 5:21.

⁶ The Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17) begins with an image and a declaration about the character of God: "I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." It is in the backdrop of this redeeming relationship that God proceeds to instruct them to exclusively follow him and not to attempt to make an idol of God. The commandments progress from a relationship with God to people's relationship with each other. The result of moving away from a relationship with God has its immediate effects upon other human relationship and all creation.

⁷ See 1 Peter 1:3; 3:17; Hebrews 9 -10, where the discussion of Jesus as high priest and blood sacrifice typology emphasizes the "once and for all" dealing of sin and sanctification.

⁸ 1 John 2:1-6 suggests that those who relationally know God, only possible in Jesus' atonement, are ones who are to walk/live as Jesus did. Here Jesus is seen not only as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, but also the pattern of how a human person is to live in relation to God.

Old Testament Narratives: Stories of Prayer

The Old Testament has several stories of people praying throughout the written history of God and his people. Through these stories, a fuller picture of prayer and more about the God of each person who prays emerges. It is through these stories that a transformation within the human person often occurs as her understanding of God expands. Two such narratives of expanding views of God are Jacob wrestling with God and Moses meeting God as a burning bush.

In Genesis 32, Jacob finds himself in a difficult position. Jacob is fleeing from his deceptive uncle Laban to the north and returning south to his homeland and contentious brother Esau, accompanied by 400 men. Genesis 32:22-24 says, “That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.”

The darkness of the surrounding night, emphasizing Jacob’s inability to see what lies ahead, coupled with the threats lurking before and behind Jacob, become an occasion when Jacob encounters one of the most transformative spaces into which he will ever stagger. Surrounded by the uncertainty of his unknown future, Jacob prayerfully wrestles with God and is forever changed. Jacob’s transformative space with God is described in a variety of ways. One such way is by Hagberg and Guelich who speak of a deeply difficult and transformative space with God, which they entitle, *The Wall*. They write:

⁹ Colossians 1:15 says, “He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God” and Hebrews 1:3: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” These Scriptures seem to imply that the greatest glimpse of God is in the face of Jesus.

The Wall, a dark and sacred place, reeks of God. In the Wall, we are vulnerable enough to listen to what God says—whether it is in the guise of other people’s voices, God’s voice, or serendipitous experiences. Once we believe that God is in the midst of the darkness with us, it can be a transforming place. We don’t necessarily get cured or erase our pain or become saints, but we learn how to embrace our pain, how to stay with it and learn what it is trying to teach us, how to look fear in the face and keep moving into it. The Wall invites us each to heal.¹⁰

Many Christians believe that when the pressure is on, or in the midst of surrounding threats, that God is absent or distant. Through Jacob’s wrestling with God by the Jabbok River, Jacob faced his own wall. God reveals that he is ever present and available even when initially unseen and unperceived. This text brings understanding that God can be encountered within the most tumultuous of circumstances. After this event, Jacob was changed. Through this prayerful wrestling with God, Jacob and his descendants’ names were forever changed to Israel,¹¹ to mark the reality of the formation that was happening within Jacob. This story reminds people who pray how close God is, especially in times of the perceived distance of God and through redemptive hardships.

Moses, one of the most influential people of the Old Testament, has many moments of prayer described in the Torah. Moses had been born an Israelite but was adopted to live in the palace of Egypt. As a young man, in the act of defensive rage, he killed an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave. Moses escaped and hid in the desert as a shepherd for many years (Ex 1-2). Then, Moses encountered God in a burning bush, which was aflame yet not destroyed. God spoke to Moses, and Moses responded.

¹⁰ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 232.

¹¹ Genesis 32:28 reads, “Because you have struggled with God and with mankind and overcome.”

The prayer conversation that took place with Moses and God on that day is recorded in Exodus chapters 3 and 4. This story has much to say to about how Moses' changing image of God effected his life with God and the lives of those around him. Moses was minding his father-in-law's sheep when God drew near to meet with him near Mt. Horeb. As Moses approached the burning bush, God calls out his name, "Moses, Moses." And Moses responds, "Here I am." In prayer, the posture of availability, which says, "Here I am" is crucial in a growing relationship with God.

In the prayer conversation with God, Moses learns that God not only has seen the misery of the oppressed Israelites but that he is also concerned with their suffering. Moses hears of God's good intentions to bring the people into a good and spacious land. As Moses is coming to understand God's character, God surprises Moses with the call to be his appointed agent in the great exodus rescue from Egypt.

Throughout the prayer conversation overheard in Scripture between Moses and God, God reveals that he will be with Moses as he goes to Egypt. Moses even receives God's self-designated name *YHWH*, which reminds Moses and God's people through the centuries, of God's eternal present presence.¹² This life-altering encounter for Moses was a new awakening. Moses' growing understanding of God opened new opportunities for Moses' life to adjust to the God he was coming to know. Moses would go on to be God's agent of delivering the Israelites through the powerful display of the ten plagues against

¹² Old Testament scholar J.A. Motyer suggests this prayer conversation with Moses and God reveals God as ever-present, ever-active, interventionist for good God; ever independent, sovereign God; inexhaustible God; self-revealing God; changeless and caring God; promise-keeping God; foreknowledge and patient God; powerful and sufficiently resourced God; and victorious and transformational God. See J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 68-73.

the false gods of Egypt. God sent Moses to stand against Egypt, the most powerful country of the Late Bronze Age, in the Ancient Near Eastern world.¹³

Moreover, the dividing of the Red Sea as both a pathway of deliverance and an instrument of protective judgment must have been a formative event in Moses' life of prayer and leadership. Moses also experienced God's miraculous provision of purified water from a rock and food like manna and quail as new occasions of faith for himself and the people of God whom he led. Throughout these moments of need, the urgency of the situations required an authentic response and a repetitive growing trust in God's revealed character. God was training Moses through events of trust, to live a life of trust.

Jacob and Moses exemplify how their images and interactions with God profoundly shaped lives of faith. Encounters with God at these crucial moments became new beginnings for them to live in a more intimate relationship with God. Both of their stories of prayer became models of how people today can interact with God even through difficult situations. Their lives of faithful prayer affected the many generations that followed them.

Psalms: Songs of Prayer

The Psalms, the great prayer book of Scripture, teaches about God and how to communicate with God through prayer. In the delightful variety of 150 psalms, a person

¹³ The Late Bronze Age was between 1550-1200 BCE. Moses arrived at Egypt during Egypt's New Kingdom Era of expansion and dominance over the region. In Egypt this spanned 1580-1090 BCE. see J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, "Egypt," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 392. Also see Ian Provan, V. Philips Long, Tremper Longman, III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 131.

is trained to pray in the delightful variety of life situations.¹⁴ Eugene Peterson has said, “The Psalms are poetry and the Psalms are prayer.”¹⁵ James Houston has also suggested that, “The five books of psalms are the epitome of Israel’s prayer life, in praises, laments, confessions, supplications, prayers of thanksgiving and confidence, cursing and intercessions. We are invited to praise God, to know him better, to love him more loyally, and find all our delight and happiness in him.”¹⁶ The book of Psalms invites people to authentically speak with God from a variety of experiences of life. It is within the book of Psalms where some of the most vivid images of God are found as they relate to the real-life practice of prayer.

Psalms 23 is a poetic example reflecting the progression of how a person’s image of God affects his life of faith. In this Psalm, God is like a shepherd who watches over his sheep. The psalmist has no fear because he or she relates to God as a gentle, benevolent, protective, shepherd. Even if going through a dark shadowy valley, the psalmist will fear no evil, because the image of God as Shepherd immediately shapes and affects his or her mind/body/spirit. The Shepherd God even effects how the psalmist envisions a possible encounter with one’s enemies.

¹⁴ Many different attempts to thematically categorize various types of psalms exist. I have found the following categories helpful when teaching through the book of Psalms. They are Lament, Thanksgiving, Hymns of Praise, Salvation-History, Celebration and Affirmation, Wisdom, and Songs of Trust. See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 212-214.

¹⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 11.

¹⁶ James Houston, *The Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship with God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 2007) 101.

Psalm 23 shows the progression of the psalmist's confidence and expectation of the Shepherd, which extends well beyond the present lying down in green fields. The statement, "surely goodness, and mercy will follow me all the days of my life," is the result of a trusting posture that expects God's Shepherd character to continue indefinitely.

Another example of how a person's image of God effects their life is from Psalm 115:2-8. In this case, idolatry leads the scoffing nations into spiritual deadness:

Why do the nations say, "Where is there God?" Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of humans. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell; they have hands but cannot feel, they have feet but cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

Psalm 115 is a polemic against the scoffing nation of people, who have a distorted view of God not properly giving glory to the only one who deserves it. The scoffer's question of "Where is your God?" probably highlights that *YHWH* is seen as illegitimate because the person sees no visible evidence of God. Idol worship of false gods negatively shapes one's image of god and radically effects one's thought life as one who is spiritually blind and dead, like his idol. Even for the misdirected scoffer, the image of God matters, because a distorted view of God leads toward distorted prayer and actions.

Throughout the Psalms, the one who prays is also called to remember. Psalm 77:7 says, "I will remember the deeds of the LORD, yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago." Psalm 77 is an excellent example of how a person's memory of God's actions elicits a reaffirmation of faith. The Hebrew word for remember "*zakar*," is used three times in this specific Psalm and it has a more robust definition than to recall to memory. *Zakar* has the sense of reliving a historical event. The Jewish festivals are an example of

a *zakar* way to remember. Some Psalms are categorized as historical psalms distinguished by the way the psalmist sequentially remembers God's activity in history in order to be more aware of God in the present moment. Psalm 77 is one such historical psalm, a psalm that connects the reliving-remembering experiences with God and a rejuvenated trust in the current situation.

However, Psalm 77 is also categorized as a Lament Psalm. This Psalm teaches spiritual pilgrims to remember the nature of God even in the crucible of lament. Lament occurs when the difficult circumstances that surround a person do not seem to align with the person's previous belief about God's character. Lament prayer in the psalms is praying in the dark. With so much hidden to the one who prays, perhaps even the very sense of God, lament prayer invites people to authentically speak to God from where they are, not where they wish they were. Most prayers of lament move through an honest assessment of the psalmists altered perspective of reality. Lament prayers often end with a glimmer of hope, a statement of renewed trust. Lament prayers in the Psalms renew and reestablish reality between the disoriented one who prays and God.

The Psalms have various kinds of prayers emerging from various images of God found throughout the book. Whether a person is an idolater, forgetful, or thankful, she is still shaped by the way she views God. People's actions and lives are contoured by the metaphors of God that they hold. For this reason, at the More of God Retreat, significant space is allocated in interactive time with God through the Psalms.

Jesus: Relationship of Prayer

A careful reading of the biblical stories of Jesus reveals the immediate connection between Jesus' understanding of God the Father and Jesus' prayer-saturated life. The Gospel accounts seem to indicate his disciples saw a drastic difference in the way Jesus knew God, observed in the way Jesus prayed. As Buttrick notes, "This is clear: we cannot separate his [Jesus's] praying from his life to treat it as a mere addendum. It is the bread and wine of all his days."¹⁷ Even in stories with great activity, Jesus' prayerful communion with the Father is evident. One of Jesus' most direct and explicit teachings on prayer is found in Luke 11:1-13.

Luke 11:1 says, "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord teach us to pray.'" Interestingly, the story indicates that it was through the disciples' observation of the way Jesus prayed, that their attraction for this kind of prayer peeked. The desire to pray like Jesus was rooted in the way Jesus knew the Father.

Luke 11:2-13 goes on to say: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation." Jesus first responds to God as "*Pater*," which is a loving way to address a person's loving father. Jesus used this term for the Father over one hundred times in the Gospels. *Abba* is another paternal term of endearment and respect, which Jesus did use on occasion when speaking of his heavenly father (Mk 14:36). The second line of the prayer, "may your name be considered holy,"

¹⁷ George Arthur Buttrick, *Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1942), 32.

expresses a desire that the Holy God be fully known. Jesus begins the prayer with an acknowledgment of the one in whom he is praying and a desire for the Holy God to be known and revered. Jesus' model prayer continues enlisting the imperative verbs of sanctify, come, give, and forgive. These requests are not demands. They reflect a settled confidence in the benevolent nature of the one who is being asked.

Jesus continues to teach on prayer in Luke 11: 5-14, but does so suggesting metaphors for the disciples. Jesus teaches about prayer by teaching about the nature of the Father and not about the precise verbiage or mechanics of prayer. Most of Jesus' teaching on prayer is about God's fundamental character that Jesus communicates through images and metaphors of God. Jesus paints images of God for the disciples that would aid them in their unfolding prayer relationship with God.

Jesus then paints an image of a friend in Luke 11:5-8, who inconveniently is asked for a request. Although a friend, he will not respond in a generous nature if not persistently pursued. Here Jesus is contrasting a relatively benevolent person by human standards and God's constant eagerly benevolent nature. The next set of imperative verbs—ask, seek, and knock—do not arise from a need to persuade God to do something good. God is already eternally predisposed to do good. Jesus' exhortations to ask, seek, and knock, are because God, unlike a duty-bound friend, does not see one as a burden.

Jesus goes on to compare God, the heavenly Father, with other earthly fathers in Luke 11:9-13. Jesus suggests that a decent earthy father at the minimum knows how to give good, not evil, gifts to his children. Comparatively, how much greater will the eternally good and gracious Father delight to give even the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:5-13).

The disciples ask for instruction in prayer, but Jesus goes to the heart of prayer, as an intimate relationship with God. Intimacy thrives in environments of trust. The knowledge that comes from rightly understanding who God is and how God interacts with a person is the heart of prayer. Jesus offers images of God, which help finite humanity to wrap their collective heads and hearts around the attributes and characteristics of God. It is important to grasp that biblical images of God convey in relational and concrete ways God's character. This knowledge opens a person's heart up to pray. Jesus' teaching on prayer emphasizes how important a person's perception of God shapes and influences a person's interaction with God.

In all four Gospel accounts, the stories about Jesus consistently portray him actively praying and prayerfully active. In a surprising number of stories, Jesus is either going to pray, in the middle of prayer or just returning from a time prayer. These various themes inherent to each Gospel writer about Jesus' life of prayer are considered below.

In Matthew, Jesus is living his teachings of praying for God's Kingdom to come in its fullness and for daily bread. Jesus prays for his persecutors and for little children who were brought to him. Jesus even prayerfully drives out those who would make the Temple a place other than prayer (Mt 5:44; 6:5-9; 19:13; 21:12-17). In Mark, Jesus prays in solitary places. Jesus often secretly slipped away after long evenings of healing the sick and after the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus prays and instructs his disciples to watch and pray, in the darkness of the Garden of Gethsemane (Mk 1:29-39; 6:46; 14:32-38). In Luke, Jesus is praying on hillsides. On these prayerful hillsides Jesus prays all night before choosing the Twelve, on the glorious mountain of Transfiguration, and in

excruciating pain forgives those set against him while on a Roman cross (Lk 5:16 9:10-17; 28-36; 22:39-46; 23:34, 46). In John, an extended conversation within the Trinity is overheard, as Jesus prays for the same unity of all believers that he and the Father enjoy together. Jesus also prays from the cross, offering himself to the one he knows as Father, for the life of the world (Jn 17:1-26; 19:30).

The disciples of Jesus noticed a difference in the life of Jesus, and they connected this to his life with God in prayer. When teaching about prayer, Jesus directs attention, not to the mechanics of prayer but more specifically to better knowing the one in whom they are praying. Jesus' description of a loving Father elicits a response of love. Jesus' life reveals the essential link between prayer and activity.

Biblical Images in Prayer

The terms “*kataphatic*” (with images) and “*apophatic*” (without images) affirm both the knowability and the unknowability of God. In exploring biblical images of God, this project will essentially be working within the realm of positive Christian theology and *kataphatic* ways of prayer.¹⁸ Although there are several images of God throughout the Bible, this project focuses on three primary images of God from Luke 15. They are God as Shepherd, Woman/Mother, and Father,¹⁹ which come from the parables of the

¹⁸ Both *apophatic* and *kataphatic* prayer practices can be helpful for those who pray. *Apophatic* prayer, without images, comes from a negative theology position which emphasizes the limitation of thoughts and words when describing God. Instead of saying “God is Good,” one may say God is not Evil. The writing of Pseudo-Dionysius and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* represent this negative theology position and are often known within the Western Church. Prayer practices such as centering prayer, popularized recently by Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, have made this more accessible to a broader audience of pray-ers. Even though some *apophatic* prayer practices have been beneficial for me personally, they will not be introduced nor practiced on this retreat. The retreat is structured around three positive biblical images of God with corresponding *kataphatic* prayer, with images, practices.

Rescuing Shepherd, Seeking Woman, and Loving Father. Generous time is offered for these images to have space to penetrate deeply into the retreatant's life experiences through prayer.

Luke 15:1-2 immediately sets the hostile context for all three of these parables. N.T. Wright has suggested, "The three parables in Luke 15 are told because Jesus was making a habit of having celebration parties with all the 'wrong' people, and some others thought it was a nightmare. All three stories are a way of saying: 'This is why we are celebrating!'"²⁰ Jesus may have offered these stories as both a defense of his ministry to the outcasts and as an open invitation to the teachers of the law and Pharisees,²¹ yet in doing, Jesus also displays the *hesed* heart of God in motion.

The intent in offering these parables in this retreat setting is not for information acquisition but transformational change. These certainly do not need to be mutually exclusive. So often North Americans readers are trained to deduce and reduce, order and quantify. Instead, retreatants are encouraged to taste and savor, ponder and wonder the

¹⁹ I make clear in the retreat that I am not saying God is a Shepherd, or God is a Woman or a Father. That would be to assign God a limiting (engraved) image. I suggest God "as" Shepherd, to contrast the difference from assigning God a limiting image and the role of biblical metaphor. When this very conversation came up on retreat, it was a challenge to some of those on retreat who believed God as "the Man Upstairs." Foreseeably, those on retreat that held to a very masculine concrete image that equates God to be the "Man Upstairs," had a very hard time accepting the image of God as Woman/Mother. When this conversation came up on retreat, I was careful to partner and not push in the fragile spaces where peoples' images of God reside. Snodgrass has said, "The parable is not saying that God is a shepherd, nor do the following parables make God a woman or a father. These parables are implied analogies. The actions and attitudes portrayed—not the people themselves—mirror the actions and attitudes of God." See Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 107.

²⁰ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 2nd ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 183.

²¹ Robert H. Stein, *Luke: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 401.

biblical texts. For those attending the retreat, these sections will be read slowly over three consecutive times as ways to interact with God through these Scriptures.

God As Shepherd

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me: I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Luke 15:4-7

The exuberant joy expressed in this passage reflects the heart of God. Although shepherds are commonly mentioned in the Bible (over 200 times), during the time of Jesus, shepherds did not have very good reputations. Shepherds were often low on the social hierarchy regarding wealth and family.²² Shepherd's work also kept them from participating in many of the religious festivals and activities.²³ It is striking that Jesus would use the imagery of shepherds. Jesus draws out the qualities of a shepherd as analogous to the qualities of God. The concern the shepherd has for the one sheep rightly reflects the heart of God as a shepherd, who attentively cares for each person.

This passage is not only powerful but profoundly personal. While on retreat, I help participants enter into the passage through their sanctified imaginations. This spiritual practice is something that we often practice throughout the retreat. I invite them

²² Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 395.

²³ Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 194.

to become aware of the sights, sounds and smells as the text is read out loud. Then I help them be attentive to their internal responses to the Scripture, where there are places of attraction, curiosity, interest, or aversion.

Often with this passage, a person is startled that God would come after them when they have wandered so far off. Some participants will have memories brought to them of times when God found them, in times of deep distress or overwhelming and debilitating concerns. The aim is to help people be present to God and themselves as the Scripture is read aloud. In this listening posture, Scripture becomes a way to pray. To aid the retreatant's conversational space with God, I have an accompanying prayer practice of *visio divina*. As a person interacts with the picture, they also are invited to talk to God about what he is experiencing. The photo is of an authentic, rugged, Middle Eastern shepherd who is gently carrying a sheep on its shoulders down a hill. I invite the retreatants, in light of the reading and the picture, to speak directly with God. This parable is such a powerful way for those on the retreat to draw near to God as the benevolent shepherd.

Unfortunately, at times this parable unintentionally misrepresents the compassionate shepherd by suggesting that he leaves the ninety-nine other sheep abandoned and unattended in the open country. This misinterpretation of the text is misleading and truncates God's compassionate shepherd's heart extended to all people, even the other ninety-nine sheep in this parable. This interpretation potentially leads people toward a distorted image of God as pursuing the one lost sheep but abandoning the fold unfaithfully.

Further studies by Bailey²⁴ have indicated that the shepherd does depart from the ninety-nine sheep in the open field, but those sheep are never left alone. Shepherds always watched groups of sheep together, in the same way, teachers would not watch a group of ninety-nine children on a playground by themselves. The small detail of the shepherd returning home after finding the lost sheep and not back to the flock left in the open country is just one indication that the flocks were never left unattended.

Those coming on the More of God Retreat will have ample space to interact with God as Shepherd. In so doing, they will become more open to the God who seeks and saves as opposed to the various other kinds of images they may hold about God. The Shepherd metaphor of God retrains the person who prays, to approach God, with the knowledge that God cares and seeks after them.

God As Woman

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me: I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Luke 15:8-10

In this parable, as in the previous one, the main character is searching for something. This coin was very costly to the woman. There are various suggestions to what this lost coin might be and the reason for its value.²⁵ Regardless of the reason for the coin's importance, evidently it was extremely valuable to her.

²⁴ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and through Peasant Eyes*.

²⁵ Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 114. Suggestions include her poverty and also as a headress.

The Greek words for search carefully, “*Zatei epimelos*,” also translated as “diligent seeking,” reveals the intention of the woman. Snodgrass has suggested that, “The woman’s searching is an analogy of God’s initiative and diligence in seeking to recover his people. The verb of action, that she seeks carefully and her persistence until she finds underscores the effort to which she goes. This diligence is the new factor only hinted at in the other two parables of Luke 15.”²⁶

While the group is gathered on retreat, I have noticed that the phrase “she lights a lamp” intrigues many hearers because they are often unfamiliar with Jewish first-century housing. Snodgrass explains, “Houses typically were small and, if they had windows, the windows would be small, so light would be limited. The floors were either beaten earth or stone.”²⁷ The intriguing idea of bringing light into dark places was mentioned during the time of observation after *lectio divina*. The lamp suggests the diligence of the woman seeking after the coin.

During the group gathering on this parable, there are often strong reactions to the parable as God characterized as a woman. Some people who read this parable are struck with a sense of hope, and the parable becomes a conduit of theological expansion for them as they begin to interact with God in new ways. To those who had a loving and caring mother, this parable annexes their previous experiences with their mothers as new places to better understand the mother like qualities revealed in the God of Scripture.

²⁶ Ibid., 115.

²⁷ Ibid., 113-114.

Other participants have an adverse response to accepting God as woman, having attributes of a woman or a mother. The person's previous experience with women, a mother, sibling, partner, or child often come to the surface during this day of exploring God as woman. During the retreat on this day the morning prayer exercise centers around Psalm 131. The focus is upon verse two which states, "But I have quieted my soul: like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me." This imagery of being quieted and held in God's arms, like a mother holding her nursing child, also elicits a powerful response.

If this were another environment, the prejudices and stereotypes that arise from interacting with the text might be discussed conversationally among the group. Deep initial resistance is often intellectually undetected but only emotionally felt by the person. This resistance, a collision with postures formed out of the previous experience and expanding understanding, are best brought before God in conversational prayer. This parable often surprises many of the participants because of its profound capacity to reshape a person's understanding of God's diligent seeking nature.

During the end of this reading, I invite each person to consider responding in two ways. The first is by drawing (with their non-dominate hand) a picture with crayons of an important image for them from the scene. Secondly, I suggest that the participants do a journaling exercise, imagining being a character or object in the story.

God as Father

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is now found.

Luke 15:11-32

The parable of the Loving Father and the Two Lost Sons, commonly referred to as the parable of the Prodigal Son, is familiar to many people. Timothy Keller is quick to point out that “the word ‘prodigal’ does not mean ‘wayward’ but according to *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, ‘recklessly spendthrift.’ It means to spend until you

have nothing left. This term is therefore as appropriate for describing the father in the story as his younger son.”²⁸ In this parable, the father’s deep love for both sons is communicated through the way the father consistently goes to each son. The father’s persistent and insistent love for his children bursts through the generous interactions he has with them. However, this parable is deceptively elusive, posing more challenging questions about a person’s view of God than the previous two parables. The size of the parable warrants two gathering times focusing first on Luke 15:11-24; and then 15:25-31.

The parable, set in a honor/shame culture, begins with a scandalous request of the younger son - he wants his share of the inheritance. Wright suggests, “By asking for his share before his father’s death; it was the equivalent of saying, ‘I wish you were dead.’ The father bears these blows without recrimination.”²⁹ This first scene introduces both the character of the younger son, as well as the father. Over the next several sentences, the younger son spirals down until he finds himself feeding unclean pigs, the most unimaginable place for a Jewish man. The Greek text could be translated, “he came to himself.” At this moment his son, imagining that he has forsaken his birthright as a son, decided to return in the hopes of being a slave to his father.

Although there are innumerable ways the beginning of this parable might intersect with the hearers, it is in the place of self-identification that some of the retreatants have been deeply effected. When the younger son finally returns home, the father runs to him. “Respected older men avoid running because it was viewed as shameful to show one’s

²⁸ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Rediscovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), xvii.

²⁹ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 187.

legs and to appear so undignified.”³⁰ This moment of embrace and the gracious declarations by the father in giving the son a robe, a ring, and sandals, showcase the father’s forgiveness and restoration that has been there all along. To celebrate the return of his lost son with a large party³¹ brings the parable to a climactic peak.

As participants interact with the characteristics of this kind of father, I offer a spiritual practice called *visio divina* around the famous painting of Rembrandt entitled, *The Prodigal*. I invite participants to spend significant time in conversation with God after the first part of this parable (Lk 15:11-24) is prayerfully read together.

In the second part of this parable at the following gathering time, we return to the rest of the story. Luke 15: 26 says, “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.” It is in this second half of the story where some retreatants often have resistance and aversion. During this particular retreat, verbal objections to the unfairness of the situation were voiced among the group in our short, small group observation after this text. A few of the retreatants seemed to see God as being unfair in the situation, even suggesting that it was not right of God to treat the older son that way. The critical point is that the older son does not see himself as a son but as a slave. This part of the story reveals not only the heart of the older son but is another occasion for the father’s heart to be seen again.

Some of the people of this retreat, who have been Christians for many years had trouble with this passage. They felt the anger of the older son, seeing God’s actions as unfair. I highlight that the father goes out to both sons; the older son in his anger and the

³⁰ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 126.

³¹ Stein, *Luke*, 407. Stein writes, “Meat was not usually eaten at meals. The slaughter of the fattened calf, which was specially fed and kept for special occasions, indicates a great feast/banquet in celebration of the lost son.”

younger son in his need. As the older son disrespectfully accuses his father of favoritism, the older son uses an important verb to describe the years he has been with his father. The older brother uses the word, *douleuo*, or “slaving,” which is in the present verb tense communicating a continuous action. The brother understands his relationship with the father as a continuous slaving. While on retreat many questions arise for some people who are wrestling with God appearing to be unfair. On this retreat I asked questions like: “Which of the two brothers knew the father’s heart more? Which of the two were relationally closer?”

In the midst of the questions, I invite participants to pray with clay, forming images as prayers to God, a spiritual practice we have previously done on retreat. I also invite people to enter into the passage and write from a first-hand perspective of someone in the passage. God has used these spiritual practices to help participants stay with God in prayer in the story.

The second half of this parable is challenging. Some participants who have been Christians for many years struggled. Nevertheless, they were invited to struggle with God and were encouraged to return to any particular place they may have sensed God, either through attraction or aversion to a specific image.

Conclusion

Learning to pray can be like learning to ice skate, wobbly and unpredictable. Knowing God’s *hesed* love-in-motion helps the person who prays to respond more openly to God’s pursuing love experienced in prayer. Throughout the Bible, stories of prayer such as Jacob wrestling with God and Moses speaking with God at the burning

bush are foundational stories for the way God interacts with people in prayer. The Psalms, songs of prayer, give a variety of settings from which to pray, correlating a person's belief about God and their actions. Jesus' life of a continuous relationship with the Father through prayer was attractive to those who saw him. When asked by his disciples to teach them how to pray, Jesus emphasized their images of God and not the mechanics of prayer.

Three primary metaphors explored were from Luke 15. They were: God as Shepherd, God as Woman, and God as Father. Through the exploration of these parables, each participant is opened up to interact with the joyous, celebrating, loving, generous, prodigal God. The retreat is an intentional interactive space offered to the God who meets and reforms people as they pray.

CHAPTER FIVE

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF RETREAT

One day while vacationing along the Oregon coast during our annual family campout, I was shocked to see how drastically the ocean had receded revealing previously hidden places. The unique phenomenon known as a super negative tide occurs when the ocean recedes at least two feet below its mean sea level (MSL).¹ These rare occasions only happen a few times annually and are caused when solar, lunar, and other gravitational factors all coincide greatly effecting the water level. These super negative tides uncover and expose new terrain and treasures along the ocean floor. These previously hidden spaces, for a short time, were available for us to explore.

Similar to a super negative tide, times of spiritual retreat often have the spiritual effects of uncovering and laying bare beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes that may have been previously undetected before the time of withdrawal. Retreat spaces with God usually have an exposing effect upon the person and the communities who are on retreat with

¹ The following websites were consulted to describe and explain the causes of super negative tides: NOAA.gov, “Tides and Currents,” https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/datum_options.html#MINTIDEDT; University of Washington, “Tides,” https://faculty.washington.edu/pmac/LO/tides_background.html; Tides.net, “Oregon,” <https://www.tides.net/oregon/1794/?year=2019&month=07>; Encyclopedia Britannica, “Sea Level,” <https://www.britannica.com/science/sea-level> (all accessed May 9, 2019).

God. This chapter, explores a biblical theology of retreat to discover how these times of withdrawal prepare people and communities to have greater availability to God's renewal for their lives.

Retreat: Alone . . . With God

Although there are many contemporary ideas associated with the word “retreat,” within a biblical context, a retreat involves an intentional withdrawal away from external distractions toward more silent and solitary environments.² The intentional movement away from familiar environments and activities creates a setting in which people often become renewed with a greater attentiveness toward God.³ Biblical retreats often involve the spiritual practices of silence and solitude having both individual and corporate expressions.

Mulholland has said, “Solitude is not simply drawing away from others to be alone with God. This is part of solitude. But more than this, it is being who we are with God and acknowledging who we are to ourselves and to God.”⁴ Thus, the practice of silence and solitude in a retreat setting often exposes a person’s primary images of God and also uncovers his internal postures toward God and himself. The practice of silence and solitude is like a super negative tide, exposing the true contours of a person or a

² George A. Maloney, *Inward Stillness* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976), 31. “There cannot be any movement into the inner silencing of the heart unless there be a movement away from physical noise, whether that be from outside distracting noises or distracting noises that we allow our bodies to produce when we are not centered.”

³ Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1970), 91. “Silence is something extremely intense, it has density and it is really alive.”

⁴ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 138.

community's shared life. The practice of silence and solitude invites people to be present and open to God, who is already and eternally present and open to them.

There is an essential link between individual Christian retreat and renewal, which anticipates a return back into a larger group of people. There is a healthy connection between being alone on retreat with God and being together in community with God. In reference to this dynamic, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wanted fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair."⁵

A biblical theology of retreat begins by affirming Christian community. Linking individual retreat within the larger Christian community offers proper balance to the withdrawal and engagement that is part of the Christian life. Moreover, the communal retreat of a community, being away from previous environments, shapes communities for greater attentiveness to God. The following paragraphs, explore the biblical witness around retreat and renewal as it relates to both communal and solitary practices.

Community Retreat – The Desert Wanderings

The Exodus story for the Israelite people is a foundational identity story. Their collective identity was shaped through their time with God as they wandered in the desert. Strikingly, it was through corporate solitude spaces experienced in the seemingly aimless desert wandering where the Israelites' trust was trained for relationship with God.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1994), 77-78.

Exodus 13 details the story in which Pharaoh released the Israelites from captivity to worship *YHWH* in the desert. Leaving Egypt behind and going into the desert, “by day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people” (Ex 13:21-22). This phenomenon of God’s continual visual presence day and night occurred only after their withdrawal from Egypt. God began to meet them in this unique way when they were alone with him in the solitary desert.

Moreover, this relationship with the Israelites and God continued to be shaped throughout the various encounters they had with God in specific situations recorded in Scripture. These situations of corporate solitude became a learning space for Moses and the Israelites to better know God in increasingly intimate ways that had implications long after the event. Events in the desert such as God parting the Red Sea, providing drinking water from a rock, delivering manna and quail as food were occasions in which God tested the Israelites in the desert of withdrawal. These tests⁶ allowed by God were meant for the Israelites to have a real understanding of how they honestly viewed God and ultimately how this view of God influenced their lives of faith.

These less-than-ideal places of withdrawal did not give the Israelites a false sense of self-reliance. Their constant need in the desert could not afford an indifferent practice

⁶ The Hebrew verb to test “*nāsā*,” found in Exodus 15:25; 16:4; 17:2; 20:20 has the sense of revealing what is true about the nature or character of someone or thing. In this case, God is revealing what is true about God’s nature and what is true about the people of Israel. Deuteronomy 8:2 gives excellent insight into the revealing nature of the verb *nāsā*. It says, “And you shall remember the whole way the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what is in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.”

of surface religion. The wilderness was extremely difficult, often exposing their own accepted inferior images of God. At times, these desert events revealed a grumbling spirit against *YHWH*'s essential goodness and provision (Ex 15). This grumbling became a mirror accurately revealing the people's true thoughts about God and consequentially played out in their actions. At other times, grumbling erupted after the twelve spies' exploration in the land of Canaan (Nm 14). This grumbling was rooted in the community's misshaped image of God, as a God who was not powerful enough to overcome the giants living in Canaan.

Although the first generation did not enter the promised land, it was the second generation of Israelites, the Israelite generation raised in the withdrawal and wanderings of the desert, which eventually entered the promised land. Moses as the leader of the withdrawn and wandering people in the desert, modeled this experience of withdrawal to be alone with God in the desert through his tent of meeting. Moses' tent of meeting, erected outside of the camp, became a model for retreat and renewal and the face-to-face intimate interaction, which occurred between Moses and God.

Possibly the most memorable event in the life of Moses occurred while he was alone with God on Mt. Sinai. Exodus 33-34 details not only Moses' reception of the law from God but also the circumstances for which Moses received the law through intimate interaction with God. It was in this retreat space of solitude with *YHWH*, when Moses was shown a manifestation of God's glory as it passed by him. Then after receiving the law, God again stood with Moses and passed by him a second time proclaiming in Exodus 34:6, "The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger,

abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.” It was within these forty-days of solitude with God when Moses grew in a relational knowledge of God. Then Moses carried the Ten Commandments down the mountain to offer them to the people of Israel.

Through the lens of spiritual formation, the Israelite wanderings in the desert were not meaningless meanderings in a wasted land. This extended time of corporate retreat was an important part of Israel’s spiritual growth. It was through corporate solitude spaces experienced in the seemingly aimless desert wandering where the Israelites’ faith was forged through intimate fellowship with God. Moreover, it was the relational strength with God that they would require as they moved into the promised land, a land requiring further faith in God.

Individual Retreat – The Life of Elijah

An example of a person who grew in intimate knowledge of God through personal retreat is the prophet, Elijah. Although Elijah was an active prophet, 1 Kings 17 introduces Elijah as a prophet who is guided by God to both speak against the King of Israel and also to retreat into a time of solitude. This courageous confrontation of Ahab, predicting a multi-year famine, was followed by a time of retreat for Elijah. Elijah is immediately directed to go into a time of solitude to the Kerith Ravine. This withdrawal was made over an extended amount of time, which created space for Elijah to know God more intimately and to hear what Elijah was to say on behalf of God.

In the first biblical account of retreat by Elijah, God graciously provided for Elijah’s physical needs such as water, food, protection, and sleep as an occasion for

Elijah to grow in a living faith with God. God did not despise Elijah's human limitation in solitude nor did God seem to hold these human limitations as obstacles to communicate with Elijah. God graciously provided whatever Elijah needed to help him be present to God's gracious presence. The narration of Elijah's withdrawal does not fixate upon his prophetic call, nor on Elijah's reception of the words, he would later proclaim on behalf of the living God to a rebellious Israel. It was in solitude God formed his soul before God formed his words. Elijah's solitude time with God gave him a strong sense of thus-beith-the-Lord and prepared him to proclaim later, thus-saith-the-Lord.

The miraculous resuscitation of the widow's son at Zarephath follows the extended time Elijah previously had with God in the remote place. Interwoven between the powerful actions of God through Elijah are times of retreat and silence. Possibly the most memorable story of Elijah is his epic standoff between the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. With a spectacular and definitive display of fire, *YHWH* revealed himself as the one true God. It is important that the Mt. Carmel display is followed immediately by an extended time of retreat and renewal, where Elijah had personal silence and solitude.

There has been much speculation as to the state of mind Elijah was in as he fled from Jezebel's murderous threats after the triumphant Mt. Carmel standoff. Whatever physical or emotional state Elijah may have been in during that time, what is important to remember is that Elijah, in that depleted state, withdrew to be renewed by God. Again, during this time of solitude, Elijah's second time recorded in Scripture, God provided food, water, protection, and sleep to Elijah.

What may be most striking about this second time of withdrawal is the way God chooses to meet Elijah. God poses the question, “What are you doing here Elijah?” This prophet who has boldly stood against kings and queens, who faithfully prayed and brought a young boy back from the dead, who radically called down fire from above, knew firsthand of God’s mighty power. Witnessing God’s awesome power had not adequately prepared Elijah to meet God in the silence. The story seems to intentionally contrast the awe-inspiring actions of the mighty wind, earthquake, and fire with the encompassing silence of God.

God’s presence to Elijah here is not associated with the visual displays of power but in the silence. God’s presence was in the gentle whisper, or more literally translated from the original Hebrew, “a still small voice.” It was in this whisper, where God is discovered in a new way by Elijah. For Elijah, solitude became the place where the question posed two times by God, “What are you doing here Elijah?” had the space to penetrate Elijah’s deepest places. While whispering gently into Elijah’s deep sense of loneliness, God gives Elijah his next assignment as a prophet of God. For Elijah, this new assignment would not be done alone, for God reserved a remnant of seven thousand who had remained loyal to *YHWH*. God also brought Elijah a partner in ministry named Elisha. For Elijah, the biblical stories that describe his life are an interwoven tale of prophetic action and elusive retreat forming a general ebb and flow pattern for those who would desire to know and serve God.

Individual Retreat - The Life of Jesus

Jesus displays a human life fully alive in a relationship with God the Father. Jesus reveals not only the very nature of God but by doing so as a living human being, also reveals the apex model of human life as well. Jesus' sinless human life is both the most unobstructed view of the nature of God and the most transparent view of perfected humanity.

Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus' practice of withdrawal and reengagement was an identifiable rhythm seen at key moments of his life. Not being the result or necessity of a sinful human condition, retreat is part of a healthy and thriving human life with the living God. The following section, briefly sketches these biblical references to Jesus' times of retreat and discusses their implications for followers of Jesus.

Jesus' baptism is often recognized as the beginning of his public ministry. Immediately after this affirming Trinitarian moment of the audible voice of God and the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the desert for forty days. This movement away from people and into the desert for fasting, solitude, and prayer became a place of formation and renewal for Jesus. It was from this initial space of solitude that Jesus would later emerge to reengage in public ministry.

In Jesus' forty-day withdrawal, he faced foundational questions about identity, purpose, and calling. Thinly veiled deceptive questions from Satan challenged Jesus' sense of who he was, his particular purpose, and how his messianic calling would be exercised. The testing in the desert did not damage Jesus' faith; it fortified it. Testing prepared him for the public ministry, which lay before him. In solitude, a person's

foundational understanding of God, personal identity, and calling are often challenged and formed as well.

Gethsemane is another critical time in the life of Jesus where solitude is practiced. Although his withdrawal was only a stone's throw away from the sleeping disciples, the solitude of Jesus became a place to seek out the Father in his moment of temptation and anguish. The verbs associated with Jesus and the prayer uttered by him while in Gethsemane reveal perhaps Jesus' greatest moment of discouragement. With Jesus' crucifixion nearing and Abraham's previous test of faith in the binding⁷ of Isaac⁸ as its possible backdrop, Jesus displays his utter dependence upon God the Father in this overwhelming time.

It is also at Gethsemane, where Jesus meets those who would plan to harm him with a settled, startling, and steadfast presence as he emerges from prayer and solitude. The crowd of men holding torches made their way up the darkened switchback trail leading to Gethsemane, calling out for Jesus, and Jesus was ready - ready to place himself into the Father's hands even as a kiss betrays him and soldiers seize him. He was ready to lay his life down through a series of unfair trials, mockery, torture, and eventual death.

⁷ The story from Genesis 22:1-19 is often referred as the "*Accada*," which is derived from the Hebrew verb "to bind" in the story.

⁸ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary Based on the Three-volume International Critical Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004) 480. They suggest that the phrase "sit here while I go over there and pray" from Matthew 26:36, is similar to the phrase from Genesis 22: 5 which says, "stay here . . . while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and come back to you." They go on to say, "Does Matthew's language suggest a parallel between Abraham's faith and Jesus' faith? Or between Issacs' sacrifice and Jesus' sacrifice? Both Jesus and Abraham take along three people, and both separate themselves from others for worship and prayer. The two episodes are set on a mountain, and each involves trial."

Gethsemane, as a place of solitude and prayer with God, transformed intense discouragement and overwhelming sorrow into resolute courage and self-sacrificing love.

After teaching on the Sabbath, healing Peter's mother-in-law, and driving out many demons from people late into the evening, Jesus got up very early, while it was still dark, and went to a solitary place to pray. When they found him, they told him that everyone was looking for him. It was at this point where Jesus was able to discern and reaffirm his specific purpose of coming. In this busy twenty-four hours of ministry, Jesus chose space to withdraw and pray as more essential that day than minimal sleep. When the disciples later locate Jesus, he declares that he is to go to nearby villages so that he can preach, for that is the purpose of his coming (Mk 1:29-39).

The flow of the text seems to indicate that Jesus' public healing ministry was growing in popularity. Peter's comment that everyone was looking for him seems to highlight the growing demand that comes from Jesus' ministry success. Jesus' reply does not seem to be dictated by the needs of the people, but directed by intimate relationship with the Father. It is interesting the words Jesus used for his discerned call to nearby villages. R.T. France observes that the Greek word used here for villages "*kōmopolis*" is only used once throughout the New Testament. Technically this word is made up of two similar words, "*kōmā*" and "*polis*," both referring to places people inhabit and sometimes used interchangeably. Furthermore, *polis* often infers a larger city, while *kōmā* connotes a smaller village. Mark seems to be contrasting the larger *polis* city of Capernaum identified in Mark 1:33, and the *kōmopolis* in verse 38.

By referring to these larger populated places as *polis*, such as Capernaum and Jerusalem, “Jesus is, therefore, deliberately moving from the centre of local influence into a rather more ‘grassroots’ ministry.”⁹ This decisive movement away from popularity and city centers seems to be discerned and affirmed while in solitude and prayer with God. The movement away from the larger cities and to smaller surrounding villages may have seemed illogical to Jesus’ early disciples. In solitude, Jesus received a clarity of call, which aided his discernment of God’s activity and particular direction at that time.

Luke 5:16 is another place, which aids one to understand withdrawal and renewal in the life of Jesus better. It says, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray.” Stein points out that, “The tense of this verb [withdrew] and the next [pray] (both imperfect periphrastic) emphasizes that this was a regular practice of Jesus.”¹⁰ Luke 6:12 also seems to indicate that for Jesus, a withdrawal was more of a rhythm of life than a sporadic event practiced haphazardly. This is especially true during times of decision. It states that, “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.” The shocking part of Jesus’ prayer all-nighter is what immediately follows it. After praying all night, Jesus then calls his disciples to himself and designates the newly appointed twelve apostles. This significant decision was discerned through the silent spaces of retreat with God.

⁹ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 112-113.

¹⁰ Stein, *Luke*, 173.

Renewal: Alone . . . with God

Renewal as it relates to retreat, is the active and gracious work of God in a person's life resulting in a growing, changing, renovated¹¹ relationship with Jesus. Christian renewal, working from the inside out, manifests Christlikeness increasingly into every sphere of human life and relationship in the world. In this sense, renewal and Christian spiritual formation can be synonymous. Willard said that, "Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself."¹²

The next few paragraphs, discuss renewal as it relates to the spiritual discipline of solitude. Renewal, also sometimes referred to as sanctification,¹³ is the unique work of God through the power of the Holy Spirit upon the human person. This section, will specifically focus upon renewal that occurs through the spiritual discipline of solitude on the More of God Retreat.

Individual and Corporate Renewal through the Holy Spirit

When a vintner plants a vineyard, the vintner does not make the grapes grow nor does the vintner have the ability to produce a crop. The vintner/farmer certainly prepares the soil and is attentive to the environment in which the vine is most likely to thrive, but the vintner does not produce a crop. A vine is nurtured according to its emerging growth

¹¹ I borrow this word from the title of Dallas Willard's important work, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002)

¹² Ibid., 22.

¹³ Donald Guthrie, "Sanctification and Perfection," in *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity, 1981), 672-674.

pattern, but the vintner does not produce a crop. The crop is harvested after the vintner does indirect actions such as planting and cultivating. These actions of the vintner presume an expectant trust that plant maturity can happen and that there is wisdom in understanding how growth is most likely to occur.

Similarly, the renewal or sanctification of a person does not happen through a person's direct actions. Sanctification refers to both the process and the end goal of holiness, which is the human expression of God's character. Becoming more like the character of God in holiness is not simply the sum of human effort. It is the Holy God who makes holy people, yet there is a call to personal participation in this process.¹⁴

The process of sanctification is relational and not primarily transactional. It is faulty to assume spiritual practices such as fasting or solitude with God could somehow build up spiritual credit, which is then directly deposited in a personal holiness savings account. This transactional view of spiritual disciplines is sometimes believed within the Christian Church, which maligns the motives of the disciplines, hijacks the growth process, and holds ransom good works in exchange for earned credit with God.

Therefore, being united in a relationship with Christ¹⁵ is foundational for this renewal process to take place. God's justification is forgiving a sinner and freeing them

¹⁴ First Peter 1:13-25 develops the idea of holiness being anchored in the character of God as its origin: "Be Holy for I am holy." Here, justification and sanctification are interwoven with the source (seed planted) being the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This holiness involves the whole person: mind, emotions, attitudes, and actions, being transformed from a former way of life previously outside of intimacy with God. Here Jesus' pre-incarnational existence, life on earth, and imminent return are referenced as a reminder of one's ultimate return from exile at Jesus' return.

¹⁵ Romans 5:17-6:23 speaks to the way Jesus breaks the hold of sin on a person's life, imaging baptism as a sacramental act of an invisible union involving the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This union with Christ integrates not only the justification of a believer by God but also the sanctification of the believer and their actions.

from the consequences of their own rebellion against God. God's sanctification is the transformation of a whole person to reflect God's holiness. Both justification and sanctification meet in the loving grace and action of Jesus. Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection are inseparable from both enabling and demonstrating the holiness of God in the human person.

The Christian Scriptures are consistent that God is the origin of holiness and more specifically that it is the work of God, the Holy Spirit,¹⁶ who transforms a person into Christlikeness. Spiritually preparing the heart, which is like spiritual soil, and nurturing growth are spiritual practices that better expose a person to the sanctification process of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual practices are indirect actions, intentional and time-tested practices, which make a person more available to God. Spiritual practices are intentional actions which place faith in God's ability and trajectory of eventually make a person and communities of faith holy. Holiness is a Spirit-enabled deepening of a person's relationship with God, knowing and mirroring God through having images of God transformed and matured.

Solitude is one of these practices, which prepares individuals and communities to become more available to the work of the Holy Spirit, the work that can only be accomplished by the Holy Spirit. In solitude, there is sometimes a temptation to take the

¹⁶ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 661-669. He writes, "There are three instances in which sanctification is specifically linked with the work of the Spirit (Rom 15:16; 1 Thes 4:7-8; 2 Thes 2:13). Nevertheless, Paul's repeated references to the activity of the Holy Spirit in the believer must be considered an essential part of his doctrine of sanctification. The Christians walk is not 'by flesh' but 'by Spirit' (Rom 8:4; Gal 5:25). The Spirit aids prayer (Rom 8:26). He dwells in believers as in a temple (1 Cor 3:16). More especially the virtues desirable for cultivation are described as the 'fruit' of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). The Spirit gives to believers the guarantee of greater fulfillment to come (2 Cor 1:22). The Spirit also brings strength (Eph 3:16) and unity (Eph 4:3). Paul leaves us in no doubt that whatever demands are made on Christians in this life, they are not left to their own devices. If justification cannot be achieved by human effort, neither can sanctification."

place of the Holy Spirit and to try and make something happen on retreat. The wise Orthodox monk, Matthew the Poor has suggested, “At the beginning of your practice of solitude, do not exhaust your senses trying to feel holy or attempting to see something divine, for in this way, you will wear out your mind and body in vain. God cannot be seen by the flesh, nor can he be perceived by the senses. The only work you should do during your retreat is to cease from all work.”¹⁷ This is a helpful reminder for those on the More of God Retreat who will be exercising various spiritual practices, one of which is solitude.

Over the retreat, participants have five-hour blocks of afternoon time to practice solitude in a variety of ways. People are encouraged to sleep, play, walk, ponder, and any other activity that a person might like to do with God. The spiritual practice of solitude is also experienced during the grand silence of the retreat. The grand silence is a seventeen-hour span when the retreat community holds silence together. It began around 7pm on Saturday night and completed around 12pm on Sunday. The group is guided through a time of nightly Examen prayer, and then they are released for the evening. There is also a group night walk where people spread out and looked at the stars in silence for an extended time. This was one of the most memorable moments on the retreat. Even the breakfast meal is eaten together in silence. It is suggested retreatants greet one another silently with a simple non-verbal nod or hand gesture when they cross paths. The community holds silence for the sake of each other. Ruth Haley Barton reminds readers, “Although the journey into solitude and silence is a solitary one, we take the journey

¹⁷ Matthew The Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2003), 199.

within a larger community of those who have gone before and those who share the journey with us now.”¹⁸

Conclusion

The previous paragraphs, explored some of the corporate and individual biblical examples of the practice of retreat with God. It also discussed the work of renewal, both for the individual and the broader community. For the ancient Israelites, the spectacular events that occurred during their wandering time became the first steps of their infant faith. Through these events, they began to walk by faith. The ancient Israelites offer a historical narrative in which to test experiences of trusting God. Moses’ micro-intimate relationship with God pointed beyond its personal confines toward a macro-intimate relationship desired between God and his people.

As a spiritual formation practice, solitude for Elijah meant an increased environment to encounter and relationally grow in the knowledge of God who graciously provides for all basic needs. Elijah became much more terrified at the whisper of God than by any powerful display of wind, earthquake, or fire. Into Elijah's profound loneliness, God emerges as the one who is near and brings perspective and companionship, namely Elisha, along Elijah’s faith journey.

Jesus’ practice of retreat is expressed as an essential rhythm during his earthly ministry. Beginning in the desert solitude, Jesus was tempted and tested revealing his sense of identity, purpose, and calling. Jesus emerged from those days of prayer, fasting,

¹⁸ Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God’s Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 13.

and solitude prepared for the ministry that lay before him. Later as he experienced the anguish and discouragement of Gethsemane, Jesus with an emboldened faith, trusted in the Father's love and purposes, even unto death. When surrounded by the loud noises of popularity or timely decisions, Jesus chose to withdraw into solitude with God the Father and pray. It was out of retreat spaces that Jesus discerned God's specific and counterintuitive guidance in the particular events of his life.

Renewal or Christian spiritual formation is the restorative work of God, the Holy Spirit, who ultimately aims at transforming the whole person and communities. A vintner prepares the soil specifically for grapevines and is carefully attentive to adjusting for greater conditions for growth. Similarly, a disciple of Jesus Christ prepares herself through spiritual practices for the Holy Spirit, being attentive and more available to God. It is the Holy Spirit who begins manifesting holiness in the person who is already loved and declared holy by God. The relational process of becoming more like Jesus is sanctification. Solitude is one of the spiritual practices exercised on the More of God Retreat, better preparing a person for a growing relational knowledge of God.

PART THREE
MINISTRY PRACTICE

CHAPTER SIX

MINISTRY PLAN

Theological Implications of More of God Retreat Changing Images of God Reorient One's self-worth

This retreat offers space to interact with God in an unhurried way. While staying attentive to the biblical images revealing God's character, people are often reintroduced to God in life-altering ways. When a person grows in their experiential knowledge of God, he begins to realize in his deepest knowing, who God is. In the realization of how profoundly and thoroughly God already knows and loves him, the door is wide open to God's loving heart. Retreatants are invited on the first night to open up their hearts to the God, whose heart is already wide open to them. This invitation comes in the form of reading an excerpt from the beginning of Foster's *Prayer*:

God has graciously allowed me to catch a glimpse into his heart, and I want to share with you what I have seen. Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence.

And he is inviting you—and me—to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in.

For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation.

We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our heart's delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcomes of events. He invites us into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be naked and vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy, where we know and are known to the fullest. The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer.¹

As God the Holy Spirit meets people on retreat, there is a change that begins to take place as a person sees and interacts with God differently. Interacting with God differently radically affects the way a person sees herself in light of God's love.

However, merely asking a person on retreat how she sees God does not always reveal what she truly knows or does not know about God's character. Unfortunately, sometimes descriptions of God such as "loving" and "powerful" can be reduced to impersonal and abstract biblical adjectives about God void of any lived experience. Thus, how a person verbally answers how they see God, may not necessarily be how they genuinely understand and relate to God.

Ignatius of Loyola, a fifteenth-century Spanish mystic and author of *The Spiritual Exercises*, asks a different question. Instead of asking people how they see God, through

¹ Foster, *Prayer*, 1-2.

the use of imagination, Ignatius encourages people to imagine how God sees them.² In this exercise, people uncover honestly how they genuinely see God, by imagining how they see God seeing them. This exercise often reveals more clearly the characteristics and images of God that the person actually believes. If God is impatient and disappointed with their slow progress, or they feel buried under a pile of “shoulds,” their image of God probably looks more like their grouchy grandparent than the God Jesus knows. If God is harsh and exacting, so too will the person act, who believes God harshly deals with her. If God offers unlimited forgiveness and undeserved compassion, so too will the person act, who believes that God deals with her in a forgiving and compassionate manner.³

Ignatius’ exercises also highlight the inseparable link between a person knowing God’s character and its effects upon that person’s self-worth. The link suggests that much of one’s distorted self-images become reformed and transformed through a restored and transformed image of God.

Changing Spiritual Practices Expand Relational Intimacy with God

On the retreat, various spiritual practices are introduced and practiced throughout the weekend. The purpose of these spiritual practices is ultimately to be more intimately open and available to God. The exploration of these spiritual practices helps reinforce the reality of God in one’s life that the biblical images of God convey. These spiritual

² Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (New York: Vintage, 2000).

³ People who have received forgiveness and love then become people who extend forgiveness and love. This seems to be the main point in Jesus’ parable sometimes referred to as “The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant,” (Mt 18:21-35). The story of the sinful woman who anoints Jesus’ feet is also a story that illustrates the connection between forgiveness and love. The one who has been forgiven little loves little, but the one who has been forgiven much loves much (Lk 7:36-50)

practices become effectual means of grace to interact with the living God. It is through consistent interaction with God that intimacy and familiarity with God grows. As the Holy Spirit reveals the character of God more clearly through these images, which Jesus communicates, people's relational intimacy with God expands into every area of life.

A prayer practice, often new for participants, is what I have called "Praying with Clay- or Pray-dough." During this prayer exercise, people are invited to take clay or play-dough and begin to fold and mash it multiple times within their hands. Jeremiah 18:1-6 is read, which describes God's instruction for the prophet Jeremiah to go and observe a potter in his village shaping clay.

After several minutes, attention is called to how the hard clay has become malleable, soft, and flexible, a result of being in warm hands. It is suggested that being in God's loving hands prepares people to be more malleable and flexible to the shaping of God. Jeremiah 18 reveals that in the same way a potter shapes clay with his own hands, so too, God personally interacts with his people carefully shaping them.

As the group prays with clay, they are asked to begin to shape an image that might represent how they are encountering God on the retreat. Usually unfamiliar, this specific exercise requires clear directions and multiple reminders of the participant's freedom of expression with God. There is not a right or wrong way to pray with clay. The introduction of this new prayer practice repeatedly expands the range of prayer possibilities into physical and tangible ways to pray. New possibilities to pray, with their

hands while at their work⁴ are discovered as the retreatants return home to the occupations which make up their vocational call. Perhaps everyday activities such as washing the dishes or the dog, knitting, typing on a computer, or commuting to work can take on a new prayerful aspect to be done with God.

Changing Practices of Prayer Expands one's Opportunity to Pray all Day

On the first night of the retreat, I share a part of my own story, which relates to God's constant availability and the invitation for communion. When I was 19-years old, I read *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence. God used that spiritual writing to reconstruct a theology of prayer that expanded the possibility of constant prayer with God. In the book, Brother Lawrence suggests, "That we might accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with Him [God], with freedom and in simplicity. That we only need to recognize God intimately present with us, to address ourselves to Him every moment."⁵ The simple desire to be continuously present to God gave a framework to understand better the Apostle Paul's exhortation from 1 Thessalonians 5:17, which implores Christians to "pray continually." The desire to fulfill this call to pray continually is also the central theme of another spiritual writing entitled the *Way of*

⁴ Gordon S. Wakefield, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 42. Benedictine spirituality suggests that, "Life is tripartite, a rhythm of prayer, work, and *lectio*. Work, whether manual or mental, is integral to R.B.'s Spirituality and is partly responsible for the wholeness often remarked in Benedictine life." The Latin phrase, "*ora et labora*," prayer and work, is often attributed to Benedictine Spirituality.

⁵ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God with Spiritual Maxims* (Grand Rapids, MI: Spire Books, 1967), 25. I gave a copy of this book to anyone on the retreat who had not already read it. Many on retreat were previously in a leadership cohort I led from SVCC. This was one of the books we had read months earlier in 2018. *Practicing the Presence of God* and other books in spiritual theology help lay a theological foundation and expand the possibility of continual prayer.

the Pilgrim.⁶ In this story, the pilgrim travels throughout Russia asking everyone with whom he comes into contact, how a person learns to pray continually.

Drawing chiefly from Russian Orthodox theology and the gathered wise teaching on the Christian life called the *Philokalia*, the pilgrim grows in learning to pray throughout the entire day by practicing *The Jesus Prayer*, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have Mercy on Me.”⁷ Retreatants practice this specific breath prayer on retreat with music that aids the repeated prayer.

On retreat it is explained that the purpose of breath prayers such as The Jesus Prayer is to be with God throughout the entire day attentively. Breath prayer, which holds one word, phrase, or sentence such as The Jesus Prayer, is in essence a focusing tool. Their purpose is to focus and refocus upon God throughout the entire day. It includes everything potentially in a person’s day, from set aside times for prayer as well as changing a baby’s diaper. The spiritual practice of breath prayer, as well as many other practices, are designed to open a person up to God throughout the day.

Goals

Goals are important in the Christian life. The Greek word “*telos*” means a goal, which is shaped, guided, and adapted, ultimately toward a purposeful end. When Jesus stood in the upper room in John 13, he described his final loving actions using *telos*, the

⁶ Helen Bacovcin, trans. *The Way of the Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues his Way* (New York: Image Books, 1992).

⁷ The Jesus Prayer has an alternate version which says, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have Mercy on me, a sinner.”

goal of loving his disciples to the very end. The following goals for the More of God retreat are meant to be actions with their chief end being to love God and others.

Participants Return with a Greater Love For God

Internalizing God as a Rescuing Shepherd, Seeking Woman, and a Loving Father redefines not only God but also each person's self-image. In light of this altered understanding, participants begin to receive thoughts and accept emotions associated with being beloved ones. As they realize that they are the specific objects of God's radical love, whether a sheep, coin or child, their love grows for God.

Knowing God as a Rescuing Shepherd reminds retreatants that no matter how far they may have wandered away from God, God's shepherd heart, already expressed at conversion, continues to extend to meet them. God's love is pursuing. Knowing God as a Seeking Woman reminds the retreatant that God will exert great effort in diligently searching for them because they are profoundly valuable to him. God's love is diligent. Knowing God as a Loving Father reminds the retreatant that the Father is not only waiting, but also willing to run to meet them. The Father, who overlooks multiple offenses from both the older and younger son, is ready to receive them. God's love is restorative. Whether a person identifies more with the younger or, the older brother, God the Loving Father is poised to continue in treating them as beloved children, even if they have been living as a slave in the same house.

Significant space is offered for each participant to stay prayerfully with the biblical images of God. The presentation of these biblical images of God is just part of the integration of belief that is hoped for in some way on this retreat. As retreatants open

themselves up to communicate with God their love for God grows as their knowledge of God's character expands.

This reforming and reshaping may begin on retreat but certainly does not end there. God's reforming will continue to unfold throughout a person's life. The changing images of God have an immediate and extended effect upon the way people view their everyday interactions with family, friends, occupations, and the church family.

Participants Realize their Images of God Affect their View of Life

On retreat, we speak about how the images we hold about God profoundly effect and affect the way we live. I read a provoking excerpt from a book entitled, *The God of Surprises* by Gerard W. Hughes, as a way to illustrate how a person's view of God connects to their lived experience. It is entitled *Good Ol Uncle George*. He writes,

God was a family relative much admired by Mum and Dad, who described God as very loving, a great friend of the family, very powerful and interested in all of us. Eventually, we are taken to visit "Good Old Uncle George." He lives in a formidable mansion, is bearded, gruff and threatening. We cannot share our parents' professed admiration for this jewel in the family. At the end of the visit, Uncle George turns to address us. "Now listen, dear," he begins, looking very severe, "I want to see you here once a week, and if you fail to come, let me just show you what will happen to you." He then leads us down to the mansion's basement. It is dark, becomes hotter and hotter as we descend, and we begin to hear unearthly screams. In the basement there are steel doors, Uncle George opens one. "Now look in there, dear," he says. We see a nightmare vision, an array of blazing furnaces with little demons in attendance, who hurl into the blaze those men, women, and children who failed to visit Uncle George or to act in a way he approved. "And if you don't visit me, dear, that is where you will most likely go," says Uncle George. He then takes us upstairs again to meet Mum and Dad. As we go home, tightly clutching Dad with one hand and Mum with the other, Mum leans over us and says, "And don't you love Uncle George with all your heart and soul, and mind, and strength?" And we, loathing the monster, say, "Yes I do," because to say anything else would be to join the queue at the furnace. At a tender age religious schizophrenia has set in, and we keep telling Uncle George how much we love him and how good he is and that we want to do only what pleases

him. We observe what we are told are his wishes and dare not admit, even to ourselves, that we loathe him. Uncle George is a caricature, but a caricature of a truth, the truth that we can construct a God who is an image of our tyrannical selves.⁸

There was a compelling group response to this illustration. Most of the people on the retreat are over sixty years of age, and after I finished reading it, one person voiced, that it was not a caricature to her, that was exactly how she previously understood God. Although it is a vivid image, it intentionally elicits many thoughts and evokes many emotions. In the process of resisting the Good Ol Uncle George image, it required the retreatant to prayerfully ask, “God, How do I see you? How do I relate to you?” The illustration also met other retreatants with a quieting sense of sadness for at one time they had adopted a view of God, similar to the one suggested. This illustration is read early on the second day, before Group Gathering 1, where we investigate God as Shepherd from Luke 15:1-5.

On Thursday, our first evening, there is a reading from Foster’s extended image of God illustration introduced at the beginning of this chapter. It depicts God’s heart already opened to his people. Prayer is, therefore, a response. Prayer is the natural opening of one’s heart to God, whose heart is already open to her. The first reading was intentionally shared during the transitional first evening.

In the *Good Ol Uncle George* reading, the goal is for participants to ask their inmost questions to God. The reading elicits a response from retreatants. The topic of a person’s view of God is discussed throughout the retreat. The connection between a person’s view of God and their life lived with God is not something many of the

⁸ Hughes, *The God of Surprises*, 34-35.

retreatants have ever consciously thought about before the retreat. After these two intentional readings about God, the participants' times of prayer become a place they can ask God directly, "What do I think about you?"

Participants are Introduced, Exercise, and Implement Spiritual Practices

Often a person's particular season of life or personality lends itself to a specific prayer practice that may be most helpful at that time. For instance, I have observed that many of the retreatants enjoyed exploring the breath prayer, as some of them have corporate jobs, which require long hours and are constantly in an always changing environment. As we settled into a quiet space, we began to speak *The Jesus Prayer* rhythmically through our slow inhaling and exhaling of air. Many people were able to be present to God in a heightened manner through this exercise. The participants in their everyday life could imagine the practice of this prayer as a highly portable and adaptive prayer through the various contours of their lives.

The practice of *lectio divina* around Scripture is also introduced to those on retreat. One enjoyable part of this retreat is that we practice a few variations of *lectio divina*, such as imagining being in the passage, which helps aid each person to interact with the text in a more intimate way. This kinesthetic learning is incorporated throughout the retreat to make more tangible and concrete the participant's responses to God.

The first evening I intentionally use a digital audible guide through *lectio divina* called *A Way to Pray*.⁹ This resource guides the listener through a fifteen-minute time of

⁹ Scripture Echo, *A Way to Pray: Exploring Contemplative Prayer*, 2011, found April 5, 2018, <https://www.apple.com/itunes/>.

lectio divina around Matthew 10:28-30. Although I usually lead this spiritual practice throughout the retreat, the purpose of this digital recording is to introduce and familiarize them with the resources I am giving them before they return home. I have discovered while leading other retreats that often people enjoy doing *lectio divina* or other spiritual practices but upon returning home, initially struggle by forgetting some of the significant steps. The recording and other written resources are created in order to help each person continue in the practices God may be inviting them into.

When learning to ride a bicycle many children have training wheels, which help the child stay upright until they are better accustomed to riding without them. Although there is not one way to do any of these spiritual practices, people who are beginning any spiritual practice necessitate clear steps at first. Then after the practice starts to become a rhythm, they can discard training wheels. Many of the resources I offer are like training wheels, which may be helpful for a season of their spiritual lives.

Participants Begin Spiritual Friendships with other Participants

One of the great gifts that I have discovered while on retreat has been the way the group has bonded during the three days together. Although much of the retreat is intentional time of solitude, the retreat setting lends itself to a shared corporate experience with God. Because of the size of the group, twelve people, there are times following some of the spiritual practices and group times, which lend themselves to small group observation and discussion. In these times, I encourage participants to speak only of their personal experience and not to critique, assign value, or offer unsolicited advice to other's experiences. I also emphasize that people are encouraged to share only what

they feel comfortable sharing, without any coercion or unspoken expectation of sharing about their experiences verbally.

There is a unique connection that occurs when people encounter God together. The retreat setting is a beautiful place, where people who have been acquaintances at church for many years, get the opportunity to become friends at a spiritual level. When a person shares authentically about his life with God, it becomes a holy space. When people who are mutually seeking God together desire to meet more often to talk about their experiences with God, this is what I would refer to as a spiritual friendship.¹⁰ I hope these friendships are cultivated as people interact together on retreat together.

Each participant on the retreat has been given a book entitled, *The Good and Beautiful God*, by James Bryan Smith. This book is an excellent resource for people discovering how their primary images of God effect their whole existence. The intention is for a small group of spiritual friends to begin meeting together after the retreat. They will meet to encourage each other in their love for God and the spiritual practices they intend to exercise to stay available to God.

Content of the Strategy

Presentation of Biblical Images of God: Retreat Progression

The More of God Retreat has many components that come together over the three-day retreat. The retreat is tailored around the three primary biblical images of God as Shepherd, Woman/Mother, and Father. In the same way, I might prepare a dining table

¹⁰ See Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mary Eugenia Laker (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Press, 1977).

before a meal with expected guests, I present these images, setting the table for further interaction between God and each participant on the retreat. I present these images with the expectation of further interaction. Each person is free to respond to God, allowing God to speak to each person through the biblical images we are interacting with while on retreat.

On Thursday evening, the first evening, we get acquainted. Thursday evening is paramount for transitioning into our new space and explaining the Participant's Guide binder, which has all the resources and information for the retreat. Significant time the first evening is spent introducing and then doing the spiritual practices of *lectio divina* and the Examen Prayer. The first evening often has minor adjustments and explanations. Often, when retreatants wake up the first morning, a refreshing shift takes place. They are renewed after sleep and are ready to pray with an attentive freshness.

God As Shepherd

The first biblical image of God presented on Friday morning is God as Shepherd. Friday Morning Prayer is practicing *lectio divina* around Psalm 23. Each session begins with contemplative music¹¹ that helps prepare retreatants for sustained prayer. This time is playfully referred to as pre-prayer. One particular contemplative song used for pre-

¹¹ Steven Iverson, *Prayer & Prayer Two*, January 2018, <http://www.apple.com/itunes/>. I use this contemplative music throughout the retreat, to prepare the group for spiritual practices and as a nonintrusive call for people to gather or return to the group. This is especially helpful to call the group together during the Grand Silence. When we practice Saturday evening examen prayer and Sunday morning prayer we continue to hold the silence. I am the only one who speaks during this time. Many of the songs have specific lyrics that accompany the image of God (such as shepherd) or other spiritual practices such as The Jesus Prayer. Because of the older age of some of the retreatants who are not digitally savvy, I have copied a CD of the songs used and examples of the prayer practices such as *lectio divina*, Ignatian nightly examen, and breath prayers.

prayer, says “The time has come/ the time is now/ to stop and feel/ the pull of the Lord./ Oh Shepherd, speak to me.” This phrase is repeated several times in a prayerful, gentle, longing posture and incorporates the image of God as Shepherd in the song.

The passage is read three times with people noticing words, phrases, or thoughts that may stand out. There are gaps of silence between each reading, people are invited to openly verbalize, without elaboration, a word or phrase that stands out to them, after the second reading. After the third reading, the song is played again and silence held. People are then asked to share their experience of prayerfully interacting with God the Shepherd. Morning prayer tends to be shorter.

After breakfast, is Group Gathering 1, where *lectio divina* is practiced around Luke 15:3-7. Background is given to the context of Luke 15:1-2, where Jesus gathers with tax collectors and sinners, explaining what table fellowship meant in the Jewish culture at the time of Jesus. Participants are also given background history about shepherds that tended large groups of sheep (ninety-nine) with multiple shepherds not only one lone shepherd. A shepherd would never leave a flock of sheep abandoned and unattended for any length of time, and neither would God.

Pre-prayer contemplative music is followed with *lectio divina*. Friday morning God is presented as a shepherd in Luke 15. After this reading of The Rescuing Shepherd, people are invited into the spiritual practice of *visio divina*, which is interactive prayer with a picture. There are copies of a photo of a rugged shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders down rocky terrain given to each person. The group focuses on different aspects of the photo, asking questions about how it might feel to be the shepherd or the

sheep. They are then encouraged to talk to God the Shepherd about what they are feeling and thinking.

God as Woman/Mother

During Group Gathering 2, which meets before lunch on Friday, the group spends time around Luke 15:8-10 investigating God as Searching Woman. It begins in similar fashion but with a new contemplative song playing. The first time the song is played, it is a gentle way to call the group to re-gather in the meeting space. The second time the contemplative song is played through is for pre-prayer space. Then the group practices *lectio divina* around Luke 15:8-10.

After this time, each participant is invited to choose one of potentially two different spiritual practices. The first is to imagine that they are someone or something in the story like the woman, broom, coin, lamp, or a neighbor watching the woman. Then they are encouraged to write, in first person, what it is like for that person or object, asking questions like, What do they feel? What do they think?

The second possible practice after *lectio divina* is for them to draw a picture of the scene with crayons. Those who are drawing are asked to do so with their non-dominate hand, which diffuses the expectation of perfection, keeping focused upon interacting with God and not worrying about what other people might think of their drawing. They are encouraged to ask questions such as Who and what is in the picture? What is significant about that moment I am choosing for my drawing? There is about fifteen minutes for this exercise. After the exercise is completed, whoever would like to share their stories or pictures to do so in the larger group is invited to do so.

After this time the group moves into lunch and then a four-and-a-half hour block Retreat Time where people may hike, nap, play, read, go to the beach or anything they want to do with God. On Friday a group of people carpooled and went to the beach.

As the retreatants regroup before dinner, a prayer exercise using seventy black and white photos of peoples faces, showing every emotion imaginable is introduced. Retreatants look at all of the photos and pick one or two photos to which they are drawn. They are then asked if those photos represent a person or a people group that they would like to talk about with God. This exercise intentionally introduces an approach to intercessory prayer, which incorporates listening prayer. Many on retreat are familiar with intercessory prayer as their primary way to pray. By introducing listening at the beginning of intercessory prayer, it is intended to expand an already familiar style of prayer, which many may already practice. It reorients intercession to a more interactive conversation. Unlike a shopping list, this style of intercessory prayer invites the person who prays into an interaction with God first by prayerfully asking God what to pray.

After dinner, the group moves into the prayer practice of breath prayer. I introduce what we are going to do and tell a little about how this has been important in my own life. To teach this practice, we adopt the Jesus prayer, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” We begin by using contemplative music to gather and then again for pre-prayer. The song entitled, *The Jesus Prayer* by Stephen Iverson, has these very same lyrics sung contemplatively multiple times. After walking through this fifteen-minute exercise people are invited to share their experience. The evening ends with a guided

Examen prayer reviewing the day with Jesus. People are then free the remainder of the evening to do whatever they want to do.

Saturday morning prayer, which is optional for people to attend, begins with music to call people who may not yet be at the meeting space, with pre-prayer space during the second time the song is played. The group then practices *lectio divina* around Psalm 131, which has the central figure of God as a mother, holding an infant against her chest to calm anxieties. The retreatants have already listened to the parable of the Searching Woman before lunch on Friday. The image of God not only as woman, but also as mother, is then revisited with this beautiful image from Psalm 131. After morning prayer, the group goes to breakfast.

God as Father

At Group Gathering 3, the group begins with *lectio divina* around the first portion of the parable of the Loving Father found in Luke 15:11-25. In this time the group focuses upon the interaction between the younger son and the Father. By this time a rhythm is beginning to be established of listening to a contemplative song to gather, then a second time as pre-prayer. This rhythm became helpful for people to enter into the listening posture of *lectio divina*. At the end of this time, each person is given a copy of the picture by Rembrandt entitled, *The Prodigal*. The group is guided through a *visio divina* exercise around this picture, which focuses upon the embrace of the Father and the younger son. Retreatants also ponder the other characters in the scene as well.

After a short break, the group moves into Group Gathering 4, which is investigating the second half of the story of the Loving Father and the older brother. The

group does lectio divina around Luke 15:25-31. The group then is given an option of three spiritual practice options. The first is to use play-dough to create something that stands out to them in the story and talk to God about what they are creating. The second is to enter into the story, through their imagination, as a person in the scene. Then write from a first-person perspective their thoughts and feelings. The first two options have already been offered. The third option is to create a scene or image using Lego building blocks of all different shapes and sizes.

After lunch, the group has a four-and-a-half hour Retreat Time with the option to watch the movie *Gravity*. There are many themes of prayer and rebirth throughout the movie. About six people decided to watch the movie with a short discussion afterward concerning dynamics of prayer and key scenes from the movie.

Before dinner, the group explored praying with clay or play-dough. This spiritual practice consists of the group all receiving either clay (which is messier than play-dough) or play-dough and working it in their hands as Jeremiah 18 is read, which instructs Jeremiah to go and observe a potter, shaping clay. I walk them through an exercise to think over the past few images we have been exploring. They are asked if there is something in these that God may want to say to them. As they keep working the play-dough in their hands, I invite them, if they would like, to create something that represents what God may be saying to them so far over the past thirty-six hours.

After Saturday dinner, we enter into the Grand Silence. The Grand Silence will continue through Sunday at 11:30am on Sunday. During this time, retreatants will do one more prayer practice with over sixty photographs of fathers with their children. Around

the image of God as Father, these photos are used as a guided prayer experience as each person internalizes what it means to be loved by God as Father.

At 7pm on Saturday evening the Grand Silence has begun. Although we do practice the Saturday evening examen together, it is done in silence with the exception of the contemplative music and a few verbal prompts. Saturday evening is wide open for whatever people would like to do. During this time I led a group on a late-night hike with flashlights, maintaining silence with each other. The stars were bright that night. I encouraged people to lay down and stare at the stars.

Sunday morning begins with morning prayer around Psalm 63, a Psalm about longing for God. After this time, the group eats breakfast together in silence. Eating with each other in silence is often an interesting experience for many people. The freedom to not have to fill the space with words was a surprising welcome for the group.

Sunday morning, after optional morning prayer and breakfast, the morning is open for each person to spend time with God alone. Around 11:30 the group debriefs about the time together. We then discuss the Spiritual Growth Plan worksheet, which is an intentional way to begin responding to God invitation with spiritual practices that will help in opening each person up to God more fully. The final act together is to celebrate communion together. We took a group picture before we left and I gave each person a group picture when I had a personal followed up a few weeks after the retreat.

Throughout the retreat, each person is encouraged to interact with the three biblical images of God as Shepherd, Woman/Mother, and Father. Large portions of quiet space and time are allocated for each person to interact with God personally. The spiritual

practices that the group participates in are meant to introduce each person to interact with God in new ways that may be adopted as rhythms as they return home.

Develop New Rhythms of Spiritual Practices

The retreat is an opportune place to experiment with various spiritual practices that are introduced to help the participant be more available to God. One such practice is silence. The group gathering times begin with silence. Intentional silence is new for many of the people on retreat. At first, the silence can be quite unsettling. However, this intentional practice expands beyond awkward moments between activities. Silence is an integral part of the retreat. As the retreat goes on, often after about the first twenty-four hours, the silence becomes one of the best parts of the retreat for participants. These peaceful interludes, the *Selahs* discovered between thought and action, invite the retreatant into a whole new speed of being. Many of the practices of various spiritual practices have elements of silence in them.

One of the spiritual practices involving silence and Scripture is *lectio divina*. There are written instructions for *lectio divina* for each participant found at the beginning of each exercise in the participants' manuals. The participant manual has exercises, which aim to provide a space for participants to open up to God who is its author. Before *lectio divina* I might say: "Begin by quieting down, sitting in quiet for about two minutes, body in a restful but attentive posture. Arms in your lap with palms open upward as a physical prayer to God that you desire to receive MORE. MORE of God in our lives."

On Sunday morning, about one hour before departing, participants are encouraged to complete the Spiritual Growth Plan Worksheet (APPENDIX 4). Each retreatant

discerns the worksheet prayerfully and gives practical spiritual practices that they sense God invites them into during their particular season life.

Willard has suggested a plan entitled *VIM*,¹² which stands for Vision, Intention, and Means. On retreat, I hope that each participant's image of God will be positively shaped giving each person a greater awareness and intimate knowledge of God. Spiritual formation is not primarily knowing more about God but about knowing God more. And this kind of knowledge is not regulated to the intellect, but encompasses the whole person and primarily their loves. Loving God through the intimate knowledge communicated through biblical images births a holy desire and intention to love God more and more. James K.A. Smith has said it this way: "Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love. So discipleship is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing."¹³ The Spiritual Growth Plan Worksheet is an adaptable pathway to rehabilitate one's misguided loves through adopting habit-forming, loved-shaped rituals or rhythms that redirect her back to God.¹⁴ Whatever specific spiritual practices are ultimately adopted, they are meant to aid in reforming our hearts to love and intimately know God more.

The Spiritual Growth Plan Worksheet is a practical response to be more available to the work of the Holy Spirit. By paying attention to the various ways God has been

¹² Dallas Willard, *Renewing the Christian Mind: Essays, Interviews, and Talks*, ed. Gary Black, Jr. (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 15-24.

¹³ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 2.

¹⁴ Smith, *You Are What You Love*. See discussion on pages 19-37 concerning how habits help direct a person's love rightly back to God and his further discussion about cultural liturgies which either contribute to shape or misshape peoples' love toward God.

meeting them while on retreat, participants will sort through the particular ways God may be inviting them into a more attentive and ordered love. The Spiritual Growth Plan helps make a concrete and practical response to the invitation of God in each person's life. Through the identification and exercise of spiritual practices, similar to a trellis supporting a grapevine, spiritual growth is more exposed and open to growing with God through the supporting spiritual practices.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the overall ministry plan by elaborating on the theological implications, goals, and content of the More of God Retreat. It emphasized how the changing images of God radically reorient a person's self-identity. As a person's image of God expands, spiritual practices can help assist a person's growth in relationship with God. As intimacy with God grows, spiritual practices assist each participant to grow in living attentively before God in the world. This constant refocusing attention upon God can potentially move prayer into every aspect of life.

When people understand that God is lovingly pursuing them like the shepherd looking for his sheep or a woman seeking for her lost coin, it affects the way they respond to God. With God revealing his loving intent as a loving father to rebellious and stubborn children, it can be asked how one could resist and not respond to his fatherly love. Unfortunately, there are many distorted images of God, like Good Ol Uncle George, which destructively affect a person's whole outlook on life. The only way for people's deformed images to be reformed is through an authentic encounter with God who transforms images. The Holy Spirit does this transformation. Spiritual practices are

practical ways in which a person can consistently remain open to the love and transformation of God. Moreover, the Christian journey is not a solo one; it is not to be done alone. Journeying alongside spiritual friends helps people mutually encourage each other as they both pursue a growing relationship with God.

The More of God retreat was designed with all of these factors in mind. Through the integrated reflection spaces, the images of God as Shepherd, Woman/Mother, and Father have the potential to profoundly effect and affect each person on retreat. The spacious spaces and spiritual practices on this retreat are not meant to be a one-time experience. The More of God Retreat is designed to continue with support as retreatants return home and as they adopt specific spiritual practices that God seems to be inviting them into at their particular season of life. Like a trellis with a grapevine, spiritual practices help support spiritual growth by helping a person become more available and exposed toward God.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS: TARGET POPULATION AND TIMELINE

This section briefly identifies the specific target population and the specific timeline for the More of God Prayer Retreat. This involves identifying the various people whom I expected to be coming on the retreat. By identifying the target population, I was able to shape the retreat with those specific people in mind.

This retreat is designed intentionally with the people of SVCC in mind. After several weeks of publicity and communication within the church, it was offered to the wider community of Sonoma. Two people from out of the Sonoma area participated in the retreat. Even though the retreat was written with SVCC people in mind, it is highly adaptable, and these design decisions did not limit its accessibility to another group.

The timeline of development spanned many months. In some ways, it could be said that I have been preparing for the More of God Retreat for decades. So much of the design and decisions that went into the retreat have been personally experienced with trial and error in leading previous retreats. Collectively through participating in personal solitude retreats, group retreats, and facilitating various retreats, the More of God Retreat was designed and implemented.

One key element that required time to develop was the More of God Prayer Retreat Guide. The More of God Prayer Retreat Guide was given to each participant. The Retreat Guide is a two-inch binder with a detailed outline of the retreat and printed pages for the various gatherings and group exercises throughout the retreat.

Advertisement and recruitment for the retreat dates began in April 2018. In May 2018, I guided a short day-long retreat at a nearby retreat center around spiritual journaling. It was well received, and it built excitement for the more extended retreat in September.

One significant component about this retreat is its resources. Each participant was encouraged to continue with whatever God may have started in them on the retreat. They were given resources around various prayer practices like *lectio divina*, Breath Prayer, the Examen and many more. Some of these are photocopied chapters of excellent books that have proven to be helpful for many people. I also have a CD, with links to Apple iTunes where the music can be downloaded, which has the contemplative music as well as verbal walk-through instructions of the above three prayers exercises.

Another meaningful component of the retreat is the intentional follow-up conversations with each participant following the retreat. During this follow up, each person is encouraged to share anything about their experience that they would like. We also talk through the Spiritual Growth Plan Worksheet that they fill out as they are leaving the retreat. Each participant is encouraged to incorporate one or two things from the worksheet which they sense God may be inviting them. Often on retreat, rejuvenated participants will want to incorporate a long list of many new prayer practices as soon as

they go home all at once. They are encouraged to notice and take note of what God is doing in them but encouraged to practice those rhythms that God is inviting them into specifically, being selective in their goals.

These follow up interviews are often some of my favorite conversations as we specifically explore and discuss living with God in the midst of their whole of life. These conversations are also an excellent way to get informed feedback on the retreat and how it potentially could have been better suited to each person. Another way of receiving feedback and honest assessment was through an anonymous questionnaire given to every person the first day. These have been extremely helpful in understanding things that were most beneficial on the retreat and those things that needed most adjustment.

The assessment questionnaire (Appendix 4) revealed that there was including myself, twelve people in total. Six were men, and six were women. The average age of the retreatant was sixty-seventy years of age. Overall the group scored the spiritual practices as very helpful or helpful. Those receiving the highest scoring were *lectio divina*, God as Shepherd Image, Additional Resource Reading and CD, the nightly Examen prayer, Breath Prayer and sharing in small groups with Spiritual Friends. Those practices that were less helpful, were praying with clay, drawing with crayons, the movie Gravity, and some resistance around the parables about God as Woman/Mother, and God as Father to the younger and older brother.

The scale for the following questions is from 1-5. One is very helpful, 2 is helpful, 3 is somewhat helpful, 4 is unhelpful, and 5 is very unhelpful. The responses were very high to some of the questions on the questionnaire. The questions are:

Table 1.
Retreat Questions

This retreat better equipped me to pray as I return home	(1.2)
This retreat better enabled me to pray in new ways	(1.5)
This retreat helped me see new opportunities to pray throughout my everyday life	(1.4)
This retreat gave me a better understanding of how I relate to God	(1.75)
This retreat changed the way I relate to God in everyday life	(1.75)
The retreat music was helpful for me	(1.8)

Participants were also asked about the length of the retreat and the retreat schedule. The three possible answers for each question were: too short, just right, and too long. When asked about the length of the retreat, participants overwhelmingly thought that three days was just right. They also agreed that the schedule was a good balance of time away and activity and leisure.

When asked if they had grown closer to God as a result of the retreat of the nine people who filled out the questionnaire eight people responded “YES,” and one said “NO.” When asked if there was something from the retreat that was most helpful, eight said “YES,” and responded with various things, and one person said “NO.” The most helpful things listed were breath prayers, the examen prayer, and the sense of peace brought by silence and restful places to pray. When asked if there was something not helpful in their spiritual journey on the retreat there was nothing written. The retreatants were asked: “Based upon my experience, how likely is it that I will participate in another More of God Retreat?” Of the nine who filled out the questionnaire, seven put very

likely, one said maybe, and another said probably not. The one who suggested they would probably not return commented on their struggle with the parable of the Loving Father and how the father did not treat the younger son fairly in their estimation. Much of this person's frustration came from some of the aversion around the image of God as Father in the final parable. This came out even more clearly in our follow up conversation.

The assessment questionnaire, taken as a whole, suggests that most people on the More of God Retreat were very satisfied, deeply impacted, and considered the retreat very helpful for their relationship with God. In every single category assessed, the participants scored the retreat with at least a 75 percent approval rate with many categories scoring in the 90 percent approval rating. The questionnaire and follow-up conversations indicated that the resources also given were helpful tools as they returned home and desired to incorporate some of these practices into their everyday lives. The retreatants demonstrated shifts in the way they understood God and the way it will certainly affect their lives as they returned home.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This project is a Biblical Image of God Retreat, designed to assist individuals from the Sonoma Valley Community Church to explore biblical images of God through teaching, reflection, and experiential prayer practices. This retreat was birthed out of a pastoral concern, because unhelpful images of God that people consciously and unconsciously carry radically affect the way they relate to God and each other. Through teaching, reflection, and experiential prayer practices, the three-day retreat aims to assist people on a journey toward a healthier image of God with a renewed, vibrant, and deeply personal prayer life.

In the Introduction, I spoke of a specific moment in the movie *Gravity*, when a character desired to pray and talk to God. However, she did not know anything about God, and she struggled even to begin to relate to God in prayer. That scene brought me to tears, because I see that same person day-after-day in the communities I have lived and the churches I have served. In response to this ministry need, I laid out the specific pastoral problem facing SVCC. A person's image of God affects every area of her life. I elaborated upon how these unhelpful pseudo-gods have diminished the deep desire people have to know God. The Scriptures instruct people to love the Lord with all of one's whole heart and to love her neighbor as herself. However, it is impossible to love someone that you do not already know. The More of God Retreat is meant to assist people in knowing and loving God more intimately through the process of spiritual practices, which assist in this process. I concluded this chapter by giving a brief overview

of the retreat, highlighting the who, what, where, why and how of the More of God Prayer Retreat. The ideas were developed in greater depth in the following chapters.

Chapter 1, described the community context of Sonoma Valley. This chapter was helpful in setting the larger setting of the retreat and the cultural influences that presently surround Sonoma. It discussed topics such as Sonoma's historical beginnings as a Spanish mission, the present wealth and median age of the city. It also described Sonoma's education, the local economy, and the tragic fires, which occurred in October 2017. The story of our prayer adventure at Depot Park, and how a church was planted after a year of prayer was also explored. It also highlighted how our prayer to partner with God in reaching the emerging Hispanic community was answered by a congregation desiring to share church space. This chapter gave a broad sketch of the Sonoma Valley.

Chapter 2 described the church context at SVCC. It began by telling the story of discovering an old tattered program from the thirtieth anniversary of the planting of Grace Reformed Church, the church's original name. Grace was planted, and the chapter traced the sacrifices that took place for the church to begin. I then communicated the new vision for SVCC: To know the living God intimately, to grow in the transforming grace of Jesus Christ, and to show the love of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit with our whole lives.

Discussing mission, leadership development, and church revitalization, showed the connection between the purposes of this retreat and how they relate to all three of the above areas within the broader vision of the church. It ended with an in-depth description

of the location, purpose, content, and desired outcomes for the More of God Retreat. This chapter concluded by suggesting the retreat is more a beginning than an end in itself.

In Chapter 3, the literature review explored recent discussions around images of God, spiritual practices, and understanding people's stages of faith. The six books reviewed greatly influenced and aided the development, design, and implementation of the More of God Retreat. *Will the Real God Please Stand Up* by Carolyn Thomas, connected biblical exposition of key passages of Scripture that laid the foundation of connecting a person's image of God and their lived experience. *Lion and the Lamb* by Brennan Manning, explored biblical encounters with Jesus, which inherently led to a radically-graced transformation in a person's life. *The Good and Beautiful God* by James Bryan Smith, emphasizes various images of God that are perfectly communicated in the life of Jesus as the primary hermeneutical lens to understand the Godhead rightly. The Soul Exercise sections at the end of each chapter bridge the images of God with spiritual practices aiding the person to respond to the God that Jesus knows.

The Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard and *Prayer* by Richard Foster both lay the critical groundwork in understanding the value of spiritual practices as ways in which to open up to the Holy Spirit's transforming work in a person's life. Ancient forms of prayer were given an innovated expression in the present context. *The Critical Journey* by Hagberg and Guelich aided critically in thinking about how specific practices might be more helpful depending upon which home stage most retreatants may be at while on retreat. This third chapter contributed to my learning in the areas of the image of God,

spiritual practices and their integration, as well as attentiveness to where retreatants might be on their journey of faith.

Chapter 4 sketched a biblical theology of prayer suggesting that at times prayer may feel similar to ice skating. It also explored the *Hesed* love of God, God's love-in-motion in the book of Hosea. God's love-in-motion creates a way God is seen throughout Scripture and approached in prayer. It elaborated on two Old Testament Narratives as stories of prayer. Jacob wrestling with God all night by the Jabbok River, and Moses encountering God at a burning bush were both critical stories in the faith development of the Israelite people.

The chapter also explored Psalms as Songs of Prayer. In Psalm 23, God is seen as a Shepherd and the Psalmist significantly moves from a place of fear, into a place of expectant blessing as the psalm unfolds. Psalm 77 teaches the reader remember God's goodness even in the midst of lament.

The stories about Jesus point to an intimate relationship involved in prayer. When asked in Luke 11 how to pray, Jesus taught more about who God was and not so much about the mechanics of prayer. Jesus was described in all four Gospel accounts as one who was prayerfully active and actively prayerful.

The three primary images of God investigated during the More of God Retreat are found in Luke 15. God as Shepherd highlights the historical background of the parable, clarifying the image of God, not as an abandoning shepherd but a rescuing shepherd. The image of God as Woman highlights the diligence with which God seeks out people who are priceless to him. The chapter concluded by investigating God as Father, and the way

his rebellious younger son and his defiant older son's actions do not impede or diminish the father's love for them. These biblical metaphors of God are tangible stories, which invite people to interact with God in new ways.

In Chapter 5, a biblical theology of retreat was investigated both as a communal and individual experience of retreat with a following discussion of renewal as it is linked to the spiritual practice of retreat. The retreat experience is a realigning with God, being an intentional gap in the performative timeline. The concept of communal retreat experience may sound contradictory, but both community and solitude are essential for a healthy life of faith.

Drawing from the story in Exodus, the Israelites withdrew from their slavery in Egypt and into a forty-year wandering through the desert. This was not an aimless wandering, and it was through the experiences of trusting God that their relational faith was strengthened and prepared for what lay before them. It was the second generation who were born in the desert, who ultimately stepped into the promised land led by Joshua. The wanderings prepared them to know God as they entered the new space.

Elijah is one person in Scripture whose chronicled adventures instruct all believers on the importance of retreat, renewal, and ultimate call. For Elijah, encountering God in silence led to ministry. It was in Elijah's still small voice encounter with God where Elijah's retreat with thus-beith-the-Lord became the source of his announcing thus-saith-the-Lord.

Jesus' recorded life displays constant rhythms of withdrawal and reengagement. In withdrawal in the desert he faced identity, purpose, and calling questions. Discerning

these questions in solitude retreats, Jesus reengaged ministry with a clearer focus and purpose. From Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, discerning preaching locations, choosing of the Twelve, and facing his eventual executioners were all immediately preceded by Jesus' intentional time of solitude and prayer with the Father.

These biblical examples of both corporate and individual retreat are intentional ways to be available to God the Holy Spirit, who is the one who renews each person. A vintner plants, waters, and prunes a vineyard, but the vintner does not make the grapevine grow grapes. The vintner can place the vines in the most fruitful locations, but the vintner does not make grapes grow. In the same way, the renewal of people is done by the Holy Spirit, and spiritual practices of planting, watering, and pruning help a person be more available to the activity of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual practice of retreat is connected to the renewal of God, which is exemplified in the stories of Israel, Elijah, and Jesus.

In Chapter 6, a ministry plan of implementation is described. While looking at the theological implications, goals, and ministry strategy, a comprehensive overview is detailed. It emphasized the radical changes that happen to a person's self-worth as a person's images of God change. The reorientation of a person's self-worth, adjusting to God's love directed to them, transforms a person. If God is loving and desires to be with the one who prays, it is through consistent interaction with God that an expanding relational intimacy occurs. The retreat offers many spiritual practices, which are designed to help the retreatant learn to pray throughout their entire day when they return home.

Goals are essential in the process toward transformation as a person returns home. The retreat has a goal that each participant will leave the retreat with a greater love for

God than when they came to the retreat. This growth through the internalization of the images of God, accepting the redeeming implications of thoughts and feels, occurs as a person relates to God in these new ways. Internalizing distorted images of God, such as *Good Ol Uncle George*, has a destructive result upon a person and their ability to respond to God. Adopting the images of God as Shepherd, Woman, and Father challenges the deformed images of God and become a gateway toward reforming the images.

Retreatants are encouraged to begin rhythms of spiritual practices which each discerns to be most beneficial upon returning home. These spiritual practices are like training wheels for young children learning to ride a bike. Training wheels are used only as long as they are useful toward their intended goal. Spiritual practices, although primarily individual in nature, are not meant only to be practiced in isolation. One of the most significant benefits from the retreat is the beginning of spiritual friendships among people on retreat. These friendships are meant to mutually encourage one another toward greater love and knowledge of God.

The More of God Retreat is built around three primary images of God, specifically Shepherd, Woman/Mother, and Father and concludes with a seventeen-hour Grand Silence. This chapter walks through the retreat showing how it is specifically designed for participants to have significant time with God around the three biblical images selected. The Grand Silence is the ultimate integrative space as each participant is freed from verbal distractions, to be alone with God. After experimenting with a variety of spiritual practices on the retreat, each person prayerfully discusses with God how God

may be inviting them into a new rhythm or practice. These practices have the purpose of making each person more available to God when they return home.

In the final chapter, the implementation process was discussed which involves identifying the target audience and the preparation timeline. The target audience is the beautiful people of SVCC. After the advertisement of the More of God Retreat through a retreat brochure (Appendix 1) to the congregation, the retreat is more extensively advertised to the wider community. There is a discussion of steps of preparation toward the retreat held in September 2018, and the preparation of the More of God Retreat Participant's Guide.

There is a review of the assessed feedback from the two avenues of written questionnaire and follow-up interview. In both of these avenues, there was a very high approval toward the overall experience of the retreat. The questionnaire and follow-up conversations indicated that this retreat had a significant impact on the participants' understanding of God and assisted them by introducing and practicing new spiritual practices.

The title of this retreat, More of God, is in essence the prayer woven throughout the design, implementation, and experience of the retreat. My desire for the retreat is that the retreat would be a pathway for this prayer, and that each person would encounter God More in their everyday lives. This would lead each person toward a greater awareness of the love of God expressed through the three biblical images of God as Shepherd, Woman/Mother, and Father. I hope this discovery and integration would prove to be life changing and that each participant could authentically pray, "I want more of You God."

APPENDIX 1

MORE OF GOD RETREAT BROCHURE

"Prayer is Friendship with God"

- George Buttrick

The More of God Retreats focus upon our relationship with God through spiritual practices. This Prayer Retreat will specifically focus upon growing in our personal friendship with God through prayer. We will also explore biblical images of God which will help shape and aid the way in which we interact with God through prayer.

So, if you feel like you sink at prayer, this retreat is for you. If you feel like you are kind of stuck in a spiritual rut with God, this retreat is for you. If you seem to be in a season of new growth in your relationship with God, this retreat is for you. If God has seemed distant and you are hungering for more in your relationship with God, this retreat is for you.

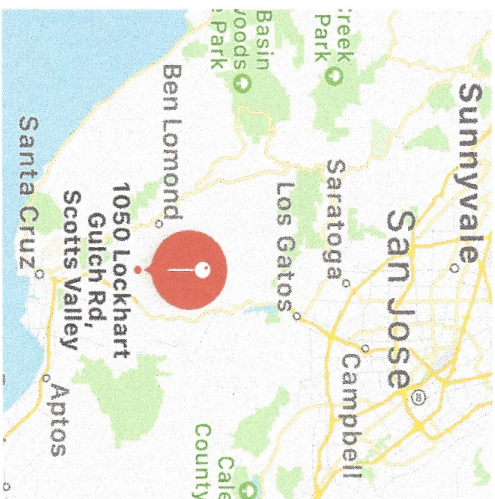
The More of God Prayer Retreat is structured for each person on retreat to be able to authentically respond to God through various pathways of prayer. We will have generous space to explore and practice some ancient Christian ways to pray. Relating to God through prayer is possible at all times with many expressions.

Prayer is sometimes explained as Intercessory Prayer (praying for a person), Petitionary Prayer (laying requests before God), or Listening Prayer (quieting down and listening for God's voice) to name just a few. And yet prayer is fundamentally about a living relationship with God: The Father, The Son, The Holy Spirit. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, prayer begins with a simple friendship with God, who consistently communicates grace, hope, and love.

Retreat Dates September 27-30

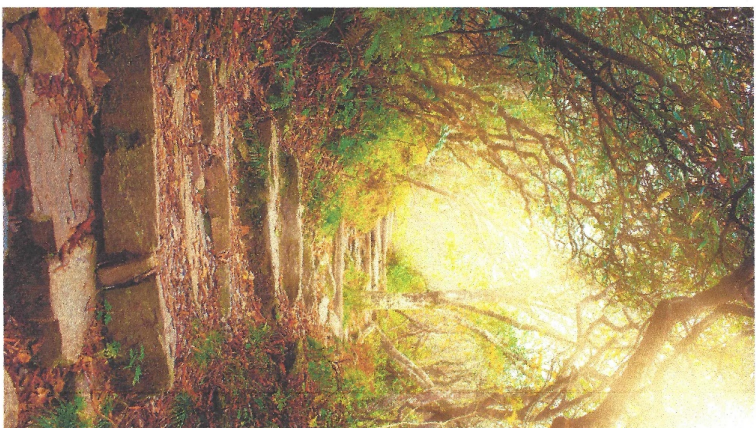
The retreat will begin Thursday evening at the retreat center in Scotts Valley, and it will end around 12 pm (noon) on Sunday. The cost for the retreat is \$300 which includes all materials, three nights accommodation, and nine meals at Mission Springs Conference Center. Mission Springs is located at 1050 Lockhart Gulch Rd. Scotts Valley, CA just a few miles north of Santa Cruz, CA. missionsprings.com

Please contact Pastor Art Matheny at Sonoma Valley Community Church (707) 938-8100 or art@svccca.org if you are interested in participating in this retreat.



More of God Prayer Retreat

A restful retreat where we will explore biblical images of God and how we relate to God through various practices of prayer.



APPENDIX 2

MORE OF GOD RETREAT SCHEDULE

More of God Retreat: Prayer - Retreat Schedule

Thursday, Sept 27th

3:00 - 4:00 pm	Arrive at Mission Springs- Scotts Valley, CA
4:30- 6:00 pm	Get settled into rooms at Mission Springs
6:30 - 7:00 pm	Dinner – In Santa Cruz together
7:15 - 8:30 pm	Introductions and Instructions – Lectio Divina
8:30- 8:45 pm	Break
8:45 - 9:30 pm	Night Examen Prayer
9:30 - 11:00 pm	Relax, Walk, Read, Journal, Talk with another person
11:00 pm -	Lights Out

Friday, Sept 28th & Saturday, Sept 29th

8:00 - 8:20 am	Morning Prayer
8:30 - 9:00 am	Breakfast
9:30 - 10:30 am	Gathering FRI # 1 SAT # 3
10:30 - 10:45 am	Break
10:45 - 11:45 pm	Gathering FRI # 2 SAT # 4
12:00 - 12:30 pm	Lunch
12:30 - 5:00 pm	Retreat Time - Hike, nap, read, exercise, beach, play
5:30 - 6:00 pm	Dinner
6:15 - 7:00 pm	Group Prayer - FRI Intercessory Prayer SAT Pray-Doh
7:00 - 7:15 pm	Break
7:00 - GRAND SILENCE BEGINS SAT EVENING	
7:15 - 8:00 pm	Group Prayer – FRI Breath Prayer SAT Photo Prayer
8:00 - 9:00 pm	Break
9:00 - 9:30 pm	Night Examen Prayer
9:30 - 11:00 pm	Relax, Walk, Read, Journal, Talk with another person
11:00 pm -	Lights Out

Sunday Sept 30th

8:00 - 8:20 am	Morning Prayer
8:30 - 9:00 am	Breakfast in Silence together
9:00 - 11:00 am	Away and alone with God (Retreat Guide full of ideas to pray with God)
11:00 - 11:30 am	Spiritual Formation Pathway Worksheet
11:30- 12:00 pm	Communion together
12:00 - GRAND SILENCE ENDS	
12:00 - 1:00 pm	Lunch at Mission Springs/ Questionnaire
1:30 pm.	Return home

APPENDIX 3

MORE OF GOD RETREAT PARTICIPANT GUIDE SAMPLE

Morning Prayer: Friday

8:00- 8:20 am Begin by quieting down, sitting in quiet for about 2 minutes, body in a restful but attentive posture. Arms in your lap with palms open upward as a physical prayer to God that you desire to receive MORE. MORE of Him in our lives.

After quieting down in silence for about 2 minutes, One Person will read out loud slowly from Psalm 23 twice, leaving a quiet interlude (about 1 minute) between each of the three times it is read. After the first reading, we will hold silence. After the second reading we will hold silence for about one, and then you are invited to circle with a pen any word or phrase that stands out to you. Then you are invited to say out loud words or images that stand out from the reading without any explanation or further comment. After the third reading, and about 1 minute of silence, you are invited to respond by walking through the following questions below. At the end of our time in the group, you will be invited to speak out any impression of what God might be saying to you at that time.

Psalm 23

A Psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,

he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever

What stands out to you in this passage?

How is God described in this passage? How are you described in this passage?

How do you feel about the images of God this Psalm brings up? What is the most authentic way you can respond to God right now?

How might God be intersecting your life right now?

Is there any invitation you sense from God that come out of this time with God?

APPENDIX 4

SPIRITUAL GROWTH PLAN

Spiritual Growth Plan:

Is God inviting you into a new kind of prayer rhythm? If so, in what ways is God doing this in your life? Be as specific as possible with times and dates when you plan to pray in these different kinds of ways. This may require you to move things around in your schedule but the effort will be worth it.

Daily	Weekly
Monthly	Yearly

It is also important to remember to set goals that are doable with your present season of life and compatible with the life situations of your life. It will be crucial for you to share some of your thoughts with a spiritual friend. Perhaps someone at this retreat may be able to connect with you throughout the next six months. By asking each other about their life with God, you are helping each other to be intentional in your loving relationship with God. These goals are helpful as they keep you attentive to God and the specific and particular ways God is inviting you into a growing relationship with himself.

Is there anything else that you sense God guiding you into as a result of your time on retreat with God?

APPENDIX 5

ASSESSMENT TOOL QUESTIONNAIRE

MORE OF GOD Retreat Feedback Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in the MORE OF GOD: Prayer Retreat. Your help with my Doctoral Final Project is very much appreciated. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability as they will assist me in drawing summary/conclusions on the outcomes of the retreat in our spiritual lives with God. This information will also be helpful in shaping future retreats in which I hope you will be able to participate.

Male _____ Female _____ Years as a Christian _____

Age: 10-20 ____ 20-30 ____ 30-40 ____ 40-50 ____ 50-60 ____ 60-70 ____ 70-80 ____
80- 90 ____ 90-100 ____

In the space provided below please respond to each practice we participated in with the appropriate number. This will be based upon how helpful the various parts of the retreat were for you in your relationship with God. The scale is from 1-5. You might want to look over the retreat schedule and anything else that you may have done during the retreat.

1	2	3	4	5
Very Helpful	Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Unhelpful	Very Unhelpful

Lectio Divina (Holy Reading Scripture) ____ Examine Nightly Prayer ____

Contemplative Music ____ Morning Prayer ____ Imaginative first person journaling ____

Jesus Prayer/Breath Prayer ____ Intercessory Prayer: Black & White Face Photos ____
Praying with Clay ____ Drawing with crayons ____

Praying with Photos: The Return of the Prodigal ____ Extended Silence 12 hrs. ____

Gathering # 1 God as Shepherd Lk 15 ____

Gathering # 2 God as Woman/Mother LK 15 ____

Gathering # 3 God as Father: Younger Brother Lk 15 ____

Gathering #4 God as Father: Older Brother Lk15 ____

Afternoon Retreat/Free time ____ The Music and Teaching CD ____

Picture of Shepherd ____

Spiritual Formation Pathway Sheet ____ Sharing with a Spiritual Friend ____ Gravity - Movie ____

Additional Spiritual Readings ____ Closing Communion ____ Other? _____

This retreat better equipped me to pray as I returned home 1 2 3 4 5

This retreat better enable me to pray in new ways 1 2 3 4 5

This retreat helped me see opportunities to pray through my everyday life 1 2 3 4 5

This retreat gave me a better understanding of how I relate to God 1 2 3 4 5

This retreat changed the way I relate to God in everyday life 1 2 3 4 5

The retreat music was helpful for me 1 2 3 4 5

Please check one

The 3 day retreat was too short _____ just right _____ too long _____

The retreat schedule had.... too much room _____ just right _____ too crowded _____

Have you grown closer in your relationship with God through the space offered during this retreat?

Yes ____ No ____ In what ways?

Was there something from this retreat that was most helpful to your spiritual journey of faith?

Yes ____ No ____ In what ways?

Was there something from this retreat that was not helpful to your spiritual journey of faith?

Yes ____ No ____ In what ways?

What spiritual practices were most attractive for you to integrate into your current place of life?

What spiritual practices would not be helpful to integrate into your current place of life?

What was your experience like as we explored biblical images of God: (Shepherd; Woman/Mother; Father)?

Did you have any attraction toward a specific image? Any aversion to a specific image?

Is there another unexplored biblical image of God that may have been helpful in your current place of life?

The most frustrating thing about the retreat was

The biggest surprise on the retreat was

How could this retreat be improved?

Based upon my experience, how likely is it that I will participate in another MORE OF GOD RETREAT?

Very likely ____ Likely ____ Maybe ____ Probably Not ____

Definitely Not _____

Any final comments?

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire. I look forward to our follow up interview so I can hear more specifically about your experience with God at the retreat.

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